Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

Stuit, H.H.

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Chapter 4

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

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

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

1 “Boytjie” is Afrikaans slang for “jock,” but can also mean “little boy.” It can be used as a term of endearment, but is sometimes also used derogatorily when referring to black men.
2 This sketch was first aired in the second episode of the two Monty Python episodes broadcasted in Germany in 1972: Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus (“Monty”).
3 It is easy to imagine what this relation would look like in “real life,” with one of the car guards offering to watch one of the boytjies’ cars for a couple of rand.
4 In this commercial, all the mamas are black, but in South Africa the word “mama” is more generally used (mostly by black people) to respectfully refer to older women, both black and white. See also the discussion of naming in Ndebele’s novel The Cry of Winnie Mandela in Chapter 3.
term’s continuing development, especially its increasing commodification, which is the topic at hand in this chapter. I will, therefore, first analyse the use of ubuntu in this commercial, before outlining the arguments that flow from this use at the end of the introduction.

The “ubuntu strategy” consists of a circle formed by the mamas that tries to manoeuvre the ball towards the opponents’ goal (fig. 13). As such, it associates ubuntu with a common effort that, symbolically, keeps the opponents on the outside of the circle and the ball on the inside, preventing the other team from coming anywhere near it and repeating ubuntu’s potential for exclusion. Initially, the strategy fails because the circle of mamas pushes over some of the café owners. Despite, or perhaps because of substantial protest from the mamas, this results in a booking by the referee (fig. 14). The second time the strategy is deployed, however, it succeeds and we can clearly see how one of the mamas, by way of the famous cultural practice of carrying things on your head, breaks out of the circle that has allowed her to approach the opponent’s goal to score the game-tying goal (fig. 15).
When the commercial’s tagline “Beyond 2010, there’s a nation united” appears on screen, it turns out, however, that the stereotypes and “the ubuntu strategy” are used not just for comic effect, but also to communicate a message of national unity (fig. 16). In short, no matter who you are or what group of people you belong to, the common effort of hosting a successful World Cup crosses all boundaries. The use of the word “beyond” projects this spirit of camaraderie into the future. The World Cup is thus implicitly presented as a catalyst for national cohesion that does not yet exist, but is intended to last, long after the catalyzing spark has expired. This “feel good” sentiment is subsequently extended to the two brands depicted in the final frame: FIFA and BP (fig. 17). The two final frames of the commercial thus reveal an overt linking of the fate of South Africa as a nation with the implicit interests of one of the biggest multinationals in the world. In other words, South African national unity is made to serve the commercial interest of sponsorship.

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

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5 Silk, Andrews and Cole, in *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*, even argue that “the nation and national culture have become principal (albeit perhaps unwilling) accomplices” within the process of global capitalism’s attempts to “capitalize upon the nation as a source of collective identification and differentiation” (7). On the role of sport in the creation of national unity, see Hobsbawm and Ranger’s volume *The Invention of Tradition*, especially Hobsbawm’s chapter dealing with the relation between sport and nationalism between 1870 and 1914 (290-1 and 297-302). A pertinent example in the context of South Africa is the representation of Nelson Mandela’s political use of the social cohesion achieved by South Africa winning the 1995 rugby World Cup in the film *Invictus* (2009).
“emergence and consolidation of a global sporting political economy involving the sale of merchandise, sponsorship, labor migration, and so on,” fans rarely “wave the colors of sport’s major sponsors, except when their names appear on the shirt of a club or a national team” (Bairner 176, 2). From this perspective, the most effective way to sell one’s brand would be to put it on merchandise that sports national or club colours.

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

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

6 For a similar logic, see the World Cup commercial by the First National Bank (FNB), which was aired during the preparations of the World Cup and features people at an airport arguing about the need to think positively in order to make the World Cup a success (“2010 FIFA”).
be “real” South Africans and subtly reiterates the exclusionary and homophobic claim that foreigners are “stealing” business opportunities from “real” South Africans. This constitutes a repeat of the way Zapiro’s cartoon, with which this dissertation opened, critiques uses of ubuntu that aim to delineate who should be included and excluded in an already determined community – a delineation that is echoed in the circle formed by the mamas, which keeps the ball in and the opponents out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The title of this chapter, then, does not merely signify the soccer tactic used by the mamas, even as this tactic reveals an attachment of ubuntu to race, gender and class. It also refers to the use of or reliance on ubuntu as a sentiment that triggers the consumer’s sense of responsibility in promoting certain commodities. The fact that this series of commercials, which advertises nationalistic sentiment and activates such a sentiment in its viewer, won a prestigious national award shows that, apparently, nationalism’s exclusionary baggage has become acceptable and available for commodification. It is this move to commodify a certain sentiment that I refer to when using the phrase “the ubuntu strategy.” However, my use of this phrase also explicitly refers back to my earlier description of strategy and tactics in terms of de Certeau. That is to say, in the face of the dominant concern that the concept of ubuntu will be diluted and “spoiled” by its commercial use, I propose to approach these strategic uses of ubuntu by identifying and analysing what they reveal about the term in order to pinpoint a possible location within these strategies from which a tactical response becomes possible.
But what does it mean to designate ubuntu as either a strategy or a tactic? Primarily, describing ubuntu as a strategy highlights the power relations at play in the ways the term has been used “on the market” in recent years. At the same time, however, following de Certeau, aligning ubuntu with the term “strategy” implies that we are talking about a circumscribed use of the term that might close off ubuntu’s potential for open-ended itineraries. In this sense, it seems more constructive to think this potential as a tactic because the latter’s focus on “the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop” allows us to look at the excess of signification that is inherent to inhabiting any system (de Certeau xviii).

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

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

The issues of property and sharing are taken up in the third section, where I analyse another ubuntu product, namely Ubuntu Linux, which is an open-source software system based on a concept of sharing and co-operation that claims to evade and oppose commercialisation. As is the case with Ubuntu Cola, ubuntu, in the implementation of this product, serves as an ethical veneer that obscures relations of materiality and power. The proclaimed openness and co-operative quality of the relations between people who are making use of and are working on the development of
the Linux operating system effectively conceal the material conditions related to the product as well as the hierarchical make-up of the company. As I will argue throughout this chapter, however, the relations between things are inextricably bound to and made possible by relations between people.

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

Strategy and Stickiness: Affect and Group Formation

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

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

In both The Cultural Politics of Emotions and her article “Affective Economies,” Ahmed aims to describe “how affect functions to align some subjects with some others and against other others” (“Affective” 117; see also Cultural 122). According to Ahmed, it is the movement between signs that determines how “affective” they are. Emotion is “economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement” (“Affective” 119). Ahmed is arguing for an approach to affect and emotion that does not rely on the characteristics usually associated with them. In evolutionary theory, for instance, emotion is often taken as a sign of mankind’s “prehistory” and is associated with passivity and weakness. It is considered to be inferior, or at least, located “beneath” or “behind” the intellect (Cultural 3). Ahmed displaces this binary between intellect and emotion by pointing to the fact that some emotions are considered to be socially appropriate and acceptable but others are not (Cultural 3). Finally, she deconstructs the assumption that emotions are either inherent to, or caused by qualities inherent to certain subjects or objects by demonstrating that, instead, emotions are the product of how these subjects and objects circulate amongst each other and of how this circulation or movement affects them (Cultural 10). From a Marxist perspective, Ahmed describes affect not as the drive to accumulate value, power or meaning, but as something that is accumulated over time:
Some signs ... increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect. (“Affective” 120)

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

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

The circulation of affect takes place according to what Ahmed calls their “rippling effect” (“Affective” 120). Feelings move sideways, depending on the associations created by the movement between objects, as well as backwards, since the way affect circulates at least partly depends on the historicity of these objects (“Affective” 120). In other words, the way we experience affect “may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions.” As a result, feelings “may stick to some others, and slide over others” (Cultural 8). Ahmed calls this double effect (of sideways and backward movement) the metonymic slide of affect as it functions to create
relations of resemblance between figures. This slide creates the characteristics that
are considered to belong to any particular body, subject, object, or groups of these and
functions to cluster certain groups of subjects in opposition to others. In the words
of de Certeau, these associations strategically create “the place that can be circum-
scribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an
exterior distinct from it” (de Certeau xix).

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

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

8 As Appadurai argues, the dynamics of stereotyping and identity contrast is crucial in this
process. Rosello accords a peculiar resilience to stereotypes that she calls their iterativity:
“Because of their strong iterative force, they travel from mouth to mouth, from text to text, from
discipline to discipline without losing much of their original shape and strength, as if, parasites
In the Zapiro cartoon from the Introduction, one can see how language and representation function and fluctuate in this process. By presenting the word “ubuntu” as a boundary marker for national belonging, Zapiro foregrounds the fact that the positive affect formerly associated with ubuntu can come to function in opposite ways under different circumstances. This change in affect, although still related to the same sign, results in a different alignment with a certain group of bodies. Whereas the former concept of ubuntu was aimed at overcoming the demarcation of certain affects to certain bodies, its representation by Zapiro suggests that it can also function to make the bodies of certain others appear as hateful. As in Ahmed’s example of discourses current in white supremacist circles, these bodies “are assumed to ‘cause’ injury to the ordinary white subject such that their proximity is read as the origin of bad feeling; indeed, the implication here is that the white subject’s good feelings (love, care, loyalty) are being ‘taken’ away by the abuse of such feelings by others” (“Affective” 118; see also chapter 6 in *Cultural*).

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

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

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

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

Ubuntu on the Market: Affect in Commodifications of Ubuntu

One of the most telling examples of ubuntu’s commodification is the fair trade product Ubuntu Cola, which was launched in the United Kingdom in 2007. Ubuntu Cola is also distributed in Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and online.
explicitly combines the “feel good” sentiment attached to buying fair trade products with an interpretation of what ubuntu supposedly is all about. This link consequently serves to enhance the distinction of this cola from other colas on the market: of course, it supposedly tastes better than any other, and when you buy it, at least 15% of the profits goes to “support[ing] the sugar producers and their communities” in Malawi and Zambia from whom Ubuntu Cola sources its sugar (“We Are Ubuntu”). The money is also intended to encourage projects “showing real entrepreneurship and creative ways to tackle poverty” (“We Are Ubuntu”). By buying the cola, you are not only helping individuals in Malawi and Zambia to build better lives for themselves, you are helping their communities as well. Hence, one of the punchlines on the Ubuntu Cola website reads: “So the more you enjoy our great tasting, thirst quenching Ubuntu Cola, the better things should get. That’s what it’s all about” (“Our Fairtrade Cola”). Tellingly, the use of the verb “to enjoy” here is a euphemism for “to buy.” This linking of the notion of practicing ubuntu to a system of commodity exchange is even more obvious in what could be described as the company’s mission statement: “Our idea is to base our company on the concept of Ubuntu – each person participates so that each benefits” (“We Are Ubuntu”).

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

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

11 With this tag line, Ubuntu Cola also leans in on the positive associations the Coca Cola brand has related to drinking coke from as early as the 1960s, reflected in their slogan “Things are better with Coke” (“60s Coke Commercial”).
more equality in the market (see, for instance, Ballet and Carimentrand 318; Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 67; FLO; EFTA). What Ballet and Carimentrand emphasise, however, is the “relational” aspect of fair trade. They are concerned that the institutionalisation of fair trade under labels (FLO or EFTA, for example, which are institutions situated in between the individual producers and the buyers of the “raw” materials) only extends the commodity chain and results in a depersonalization of the fair trade process. It prevents consumers from giving a “human face to the target of their action in favour of development” (319). Other scholars point out, however, that the institutionalization of fair trade is a pragmatic solution to one of the paradoxes inherent to the phenomenon, namely that “if the fair trade movement really wishes to support Southern producers, it must focus on volume, without which results remain marginal and insignificant” (Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 69).

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

The effects of this shift, however, remain unclear. Although the effect of fair trade on the market as well as on Southern producers seems reasonably tangible and beneficial, there is more to this adjustment to traditional exchange than meets the eye (Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 74-5). For instance, does the emphasis on the reinforcement of the position of Southern producers, although the movement keeps on growing and as such seems to improve their position in the market (see FLO), not deepen the inequalities on which the capitalist system is based? As Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance also point out, what happens to the food security within the countries where fair trade producers are located if they are mainly oriented towards export and if the demand for fair trade products keeps growing (74)? And what consequences does the increased distribution of food products (which need to be transported quickly) to consumers on the other side of the globe have on the environment (75)?
Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[In a way, one is tempted to turn Marx’s formula on its head: under contemporary capitalism, the objective market “relations between things” tend to assume the phantasmagorical form of pseudo-personalized “relations between people.” (142)
This also seems to be the case with Ubuntu Cola. The relation between the producers of the cane sugar and the consumer is mediated by the product that links them, raising the question whether either the product or the relation is primary in this process, or whether they function in unison. Following Žižek, it seems that the product is indeed crucial, since the other relations mediated by it – those between producer, buyer, distributor and seller, for instance – are not part of the Ubuntu “feel” of the product as presented on their website. As such, the reversal of the traditional notion of commodity fetishism and its apparent shift towards relationality is, indeed, phantasmagorical (Nicholls 249); apparently, Ubuntu Cola is not, or at least not only, about the actual relations created by the product, but mostly about how the imagined directness of the relation to the producer, mediated through economic behaviour, affects the consumer. Ultimately, then, Ubuntu Cola seems to revolve around the gratification of self-interest of the consumer by a relationality that functions by proxy. As such, Ubuntu Cola reveals itself as a product that reflects a kind of ubuntu strategy in which relations are strategically organised in order to fulfil the interests involved. In this case, the ubuntu strategy comes to stand, if not for fair trade in the strict sense of the term, at least for a promotion of fairer trade, which is, if not perfect, better than nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 In particular, see the discussion of Christopher Marx’s claim that ubuntu, during this period, functioned as an “Africanist version of integral nationalism” (58).
Besides these processes of state intervention, McDonald offers an overview of attempts to “marry” ubuntu to capitalism, resulting in what he terms (after Visser) “ubuntu capitalism” (143-4). McDonald’s concern for the welfare of ubuntu as a term is, as we will see, well-founded, but he leaves two interrelated issues out of the equation. The first is that he does not look at commodities per se. He looks at policy, both in a governmental and a business setting, but not at specific products and what they tell us about ubuntu. As became clear in the case of Ubuntu Cola, the strategic use of the combination of ubuntu with the fair trade model is not exclusively problematic. There is something to gain – namely, fairer trade – from this process as well. The second and related point is that McDonald considers these capitalist developments to be inherently at odds with ubuntu philosophy. In light of the discussion of Žižek’s (phantasmagorical) reversal of Marx’ commodity fetishism and the orientation towards relationality in the market, however, I would say that the developments McDonald describes are actually integral to how ubuntu is unfolding globally. In other words, it is not that ubuntu is inherently at odds with neoliberal ways of thinking, as McDonald suggests, but, rather, that ubuntu is extremely suitable for neoliberal use – a suitability that has to do with ubuntu’s “hidden” reliance on property, which I will discuss below. Consequently, ubuntu itself has become aligned with the capitalist system and needs to be analysed as such, rather than painstakingly divorced from it.

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

In *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*, management gurus Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree claim, for instance, that competitive advantage in South Africa can only be achieved “through creating and doing something that has never been done before, with customers, in terms of production and management practices” (4). In order to do this, businesses in Africa (not just South Africa) will have to rely on the continent’s spiritual and social heritage. It is through social innovation
along the lines of ubuntu, which will unleash “the energy and collective solidarity” of the members of a community, that Africa can “win in the global arena” (4). According to Mbigi and Maree, ubuntu is “a universal concept that can be applicable to all poor communities” (1). This concept – which is universal, yet restricted to “all poor communities” – can be more specifically described as a survival strategy:

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

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

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

15 Other scholars who have described ubuntu in terms of a survival strategy are Allister Sparks and Monica Wilson (see Introduction).
commit to common goals (see also Mangaliso and Damane 25; Lundin and Nelson). In the long run, this is good for profits. To what extent, however, even a successful integration of ubuntu on the shop floor effectively re-structures businesses as long as the demand for competitive advantage and the current notion of private property remains unchanged is doubtful.

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

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

16 Mangaliso and Damane even argue that group solidarity is crucial and beneficial for companies and should be encouraged. They consider ubuntu’s emphasis on the importance of kinship ties within organizations “to be a plus” (25). Rather than reflecting a sense of nepotism, hiring relatives ensures a reliable workforce as well as “a layer of emotional and psychological support to workers” (25). Lutz, on the other hand, warns against the negative side effects of stressing the importance of the group in a work environment because it might result in “defective communalism and a discouragement of individual initiative” (324).
result of which has been that the dire needs of the mass movement that made the end of apartheid possible in the first place have largely been ignored (700). Although post-apartheid inequality is now at least no longer primarily organised around race, the divisions between classes have become increasingly apparent, and the group that bears the brunt of this shift has remained strikingly similar.

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

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

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

17 See also Deborah Posel’s article “Races to Consume: Revisiting South Africa’s History of Race, Consumption and the Struggle for Freedom,” where she reflects on how, during apartheid, “the desire and power to consume was racialized” and how the subsequent notion of consumption came to be interrelated with “varied and contested imaginings of ‘freedom’” (160).
When attempting to provide some necessarily provisional answers to such questions in the form of considering a tactical approach to the strategic impositions made on consumers and ubuntu as a term alike, one always runs the risk of turning the tactics aimed at remedying the ways in which the responses to such interpellations take place into strategies themselves. The question arises under what conditions and circumstances “poaching,” to use de Certeau’s term for tactics, on territory demarcated by someone else is still different from appropriating space, especially under the consideration that tactics, since they are directed at making the hostility of dominant systems inhabitable, both oppose and enhance this system. As the cases of Ubuntu Cola and ubuntu-centred management discourse suggest, what is considered to be a striving for the common good (in this case, the attempt to address the huge issue of poverty on the African continent) could very well result in perpetuating or even aggravating the existing situation.

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

Tactics: Ubuntu as a Space for Redefinition

As becomes clear from the above and as McDonald’s title suggests, “ubuntu bashing” is easy to do, but a more pertinent approach would be to look for the space of redefinition offered by this situation. One of the products that is often considered to do just that is Ubuntu Linux, an open source operating system that, supposedly, works better than Microsoft’s Windows and provides a “prettier feel” than Apple’s Mac OS. Most importantly, however, its premise, as well as its promise, is that it must be accessible to and usable by everyone. In other words, it will always be free and it will always function in combination with any given hardware. In the sense that the product functions as an alternative for consumers who do not want to invest in companies that exploit both consumers and workers, it is similar to the fair trade initiative discussed in the previ-
ous section. Yet, Ubuntu Linux avoids some of the direct compromises attached to fair trade products like Ubuntu Cola (think, for instance, of the problem of distribution or the consequences of fair trade on national food situations in the global South), exactly because it is directly available from the Internet and completely free for its users. Since the circulation of the product itself is thus freed from direct exchange-value, it seems that Ubuntu Linux, in terms of de Certeau, is tactically manoeuvring in a strategic capitalistic field. It seems to be poaching on the possibilities offered by other players in the market, which develop operating systems and software that result in direct profit.

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

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

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

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

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

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19 This is even more ironic when one considers that Ubuntu Linux is a simplified version of “regular” Linux distributions that do not rely, at least not exclusively, on “clickable” interfaces, but require considerable knowledge of Linux’s programming language.
has a casting vote in the nomination of the members that serve on both the council and the board. Quite literally, the man who holds the stakes and has jokingly called himself the SABDFL (self-appointed benevolent dictator for life) decides which ideas and problems tabled by the council and the board will be pursued for further development by Canonical, the company that provides Ubuntu's platform ("Governance"). This company is termed “the leader” of the Ubuntu project, because it has, as Ubuntu's main developer, ultimate knowledge of its functioning (“Ubuntu and Canonical”). The obvious discrepancy here is that the “actual” leader is not Canonical, but the stakeholder who tells them what to do.

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

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

What do we make of this somewhat problematic prioritizing of intracommunal relations that simultaneously obscures the property-oriented relations within the project? Again, Žižek is helpful. As discussed in relation to Ubuntu Cola, Žižek claims that under current capitalism, the mechanism of Marxist commodity fetishism seems to have been reversed. Although this could be regarded as a troubling development in capitalism's ability to reinvigorate itself, it is also a point of redefinition, in the sense
that it is, quite literally, a return to the original definition of commodity fetishism by Marx. Žižek underlines that “the objective market ‘relations between things’” remain unaltered and that the reversal, though tempting to make, really is phantasmagorical:

Here, more than ever, it is crucial to remember the lesson of the Marxist dialectic of fetishization: the “reification” of relations between people (the fact that they assume the form of phantasmagorical “relations between things”) is always redoubled by the apparently opposite process, by the false “personalization” (“psychologization”) of what are effectively objective social processes. (141-2)

In other words, the “relations between things” re-assert themselves all the more pertinently because they appear as their opposite, namely as relations between people. This detachment of the circulation of things, or what Žižek paradoxically calls “objective social processes,” from relations between people can have an immense benefit:

[T]he displacement of the fetishism onto “relations between things” de-fetishizes “relations between persons,” allowing them to acquire “formal” freedom and autonomy. (142)

Such a de-fetishisation and, in a sense, de-mystification of relations between persons implies that they cease to be obscured as such. Instead, we can now see this fetishistic relation for what it “really” is, namely phantasmagoric. This de-fetishisation, then, allows for the perception of relations between people as containing a “formal” freedom and autonomy. According to Žižek, this formal freedom, in which we recognize ourselves and are recognized as being, even if in a limited sense, free from our ties to things, offers us a potential frame for re-definition because it is a precondition for “actual” freedom:

In order to experience this antagonism between my freedom and the actuality of my servitude, however, I have to be recognized as formally free: the demand for my actual freedom can only arise out of my “formal” freedom. (143)

In other words, if relations between people become recognizable as phantasmagoric, they also become de-constructable and, finally, redefinable. Changing the system from within is only possible through this recognition of “formal” freedom.

Promising as this may sound, one problem asserts itself at this point regarding Žižek’s premise that relations in current capitalism exist between things, but appear
to us as if they were dependent on relations between people. I would argue, following Ahmed’s formulation of the circulation of affect and the analysis of Ubuntu Cola, that relations between people are mediated by relations between things, since, from a market perspective, things cannot circulate without human relations taking shape around them. As such, the two types of relationship, described by Žižek as discernibly separable, are inextricably bound up with and mutually dependent on each other. So, even though Žižek seems to recognize that “formal” freedom is just that, since it exists in antagonism with the “actuality of my servitude” (which I take to refer to the entwined nature of the two relations) he ends up constructing an argument as if their separation were a possibility.

In the course of this argument, Žižek accuses Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri of overlooking the importance of “objective social processes” and of relying too much on the logic of relations between people. They fall into what Žižek calls the “trap” of reversed commodity fetishism: “what they celebrate as the direct ‘production of life’ is a structural illusion of this kind” (142). Hardt and Negri claim, however, that these relations are actually the most productive point of dissent within capital and consider them to be a possibility for the system’s undoing. In the development of capitalism’s increasing reliance on the products of what Hardt and Negri term social labour, they glimpse the potential of formulating a political project that “cuts diagonally across these false alternatives – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist – and opens a new space for politics” (Commonwealth ix). In the next section, I will further explore how the unavoidable connection between people and things can serve as a way to think a new space for politics along the lines of ubuntu. In order to do so, it will first be necessary, since ubuntu has been repeatedly described as a survival strategy amongst the poor in South Africa, to further define Hardt and Negri’s use of the concept of “the poor.”

A New Space for Politics: Ubuntu and “the Poor”

According to Hardt and Negri, a new space for politics will rise from and will be located in “the common,” which is both produced by and productive of change.20 They

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20 Hardt and Negri’s reference to the common needs to be distinguished from what is usually called “the commons.” As David Harvey points out in “The Future of the Commons,” the commons is generally thought of as a cluster of open resources that nobody owns, but that everyone can access and is associated with natural resources. Yet, the commons is also an ambiguous term that is often thought in relation to restrictive lines of enclosure and private property. Hardt and Negri’s formulation is meant to move away from “the logic of scarcity” and
stress that the common should be understood in terms of communication: “we can communicate only on the basis of languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships we share in common, and in turn the results of our communication are new common languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships” (Multitude 197). The common, thus, does not only refer to material property, but is, rather, based on the perception that forms of labour in the capitalist system have evolved towards a notion of work that increasingly involves the production of “cooperation or the construction of social relationships and networks of communication” (131). From this perspective, Hardt and Negri claim, it is no longer accurate to speak of a working class; the concept should be extended to that of the “multitude,” since the shift in the nature of labour has created a new form of “becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor” (114). The multitude needs to be distinguished from both the collective and “the undifferentiated unity of the people” (99). It is an active social subject, “which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common,” yet relies on the differences between them:

The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common. (Multitude 100)

This acting and being in common consequently serves the multitude’s main purpose and main revolutionary potential, namely to fulfil the “desire and demand for global democracy” and “an alternative global society” through self-rule (xvi, xvii).

One point of critique that immediately comes to mind in relation to the conception of the common and the multitude as described by Hardt and Negri is how they imagine a globally organised multitude will work in practice.21 They seem to offer very little as to a theorisation of the formation and maintenance of this group, apart from the fact that it forms itself through an alignment of the common desire for change. Contra Ahmed, who argues for the visibility of the mechanics of grouping through affect and, hence, for the contextualization of such groupings, Hardt and Negri claim that:

exclusion, and looks for redefinition in the field of what could be a “cultural common,” which is more dynamic than the first (Harvey 103).

See Warren Montag (2005) for an analysis of the concept of the multitude in Spinoza. In strongly simplified terms, Montag points out that Negri glosses over the fact that the multitude is, in fact, an ambiguous concept that revolves around the fear it instills in those who rule it. In this sense, the multitude constitutes the limits of Empire.
The multitude has no reason to look outside its own history and its own present productive power for the means necessary for its constitution as a political subject. (*Empire* 396)

Susan Ruddick takes issue with this formulation of the multitude, because it forces different kinds of labour into one affectively defined category. In other words, it collapses “the open-ended possibilities of desire onto the sameness of a particular vision of labor” (33). Ruddick is concerned that tying affect to labour alone, and, furthermore, presenting this labour as an undifferentiated category, represents a move that forecloses any kind of critical reflection on the possibilities of desire, and, in extension, on the constitution as well as the object of the multitude. In this sense, the formulation of the multitude as a tactics to effect change within Capital can easily become a measure equally prescriptive to the system it aims to poach upon.

Another problem concerns Hardt and Negri’s claim that an internally differentiated social subject should focus on what it has in common. Again, Ruddick aptly argues that an excessive focus on commonality begs the question of how one responds to a difference that is truly unsettling, as described, for example, by Emmanuel Levinas (34). This critique not only concerns Hardt and Negri’s formulation of the multitude, but also resonates in the context of ubuntu, especially in its guise as a conflation of self-interest with that of the other as discussed with regard to Tutu’s definition in Chapter 1. What happens if the multitude, or a group of people “practicing” ubuntu, is internally divided about what it wants? What if it does not just want to work for the liberation from capital in its current form? Maybe it wants all sorts of different things, at different times, and in different places?

The concept of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, which revolves around the negotiation of various interests that come together because of historical contingency, precisely aims to address this problem by allowing for a temporal conglomeration of components that are not aligned by a common and unifying desire, but rather, by how they can manage to function in concert with each other in a particular place and time. This function may or may not be structured around desire and does not serve a predetermined goal. By formulating ubuntu in this way I seek to think beyond, as I have explained in Chapter 2, the idea of ubuntu as a future perfect, in which ubuntu becomes a lost treasure of social cohesion from an idealized past that is projected into a communally imagined and connected future. Ubuntu as a convergence of interests is intended to attest that such an idealized imagination of the future as a common enterprise of interconnected individuals forecloses the open-ended potential of the fact that the alignment of different interests (whether negotiated or contingent) is
always subject to their necessarily temporarily historical co-evolution and might, as such, change along the way. As I have argued in Chapter 3, a strategic positing of a common purpose can be politically pertinent, but simultaneously demonstrates the need to constantly assess the conditions that make such formations possible.

Indeed, the practical formation of the multitude is problematic, precisely because Hardt and Negri locate it in relation to the dubiously objectified category of “the poor.” Like Mbigi and Maree have done in relation to the application of ubuntu in business management, Hardt and Negri uncritically attach humanitarian values of solidarity as a strategy of survival to a common experience of poor people. A construct that forms the basis of Hardt and Negri’s reading of solidarity as a re-politicisation of love, which they define as something that is anything but “spontaneous or passive”:

To understand love as a philosophical and political concept, it is useful to begin from the perspective of the poor and the innumerable forms of social solidarity and social production that one recognizes everywhere among those who live in poverty. Solidarity, care for others, creating community, and cooperating in common projects is for them an essential survival mechanism. (Commonwealth 180)

Although the fact that Hardt and Negri’s insistence on regarding “the poor” in the light of their “powers of invention and production” is, in a sense, refreshing compared to a more common definition of this group through lack, it is also problematic because the category of the poor is relentlessly described as a group of people who are unequivocally enthusiastic about poverty as an opportunity to realize the common or a global re-distribution of wealth.22

In their chapter “The Multitude of the Poor,” for instance, Hardt and Negri claim that different “kinds” of property produce different subjectivities. According to them, private property creates a kind of subjectivity that is both individualistic, because it is aimed at extending property in direct competition with others, as well as unified, because it clusters subjectivities in groups that aim to protect their property from those that do not have anything: the poor. This way, class difference is created. The poor, in turn, are characterized by “a production of social subjectivity that results in a radically plural and open body politic, opposed to the individualism and the exclusive,

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22 The re-distribution of wealth is, in South Africa, inextricably bound up with the problems around the re-distribution of land after the end of apartheid, when the first democratic government was confronted with the task of formulating successful policies in dealing with the loaded and intricate social entanglements that resulted from centuries of systematic dispossession.
unified social body of property” (Commonwealth 39-40). From this perspective, differences are caused by certain attitudes towards property. Being “poor,” then, no longer refers to not “owning” anything, but to maintaining an attitude towards poverty that is aimed at producing property in common with others in the multitude. As such, “poverty” seems to become a metaphor that functions to encourage people to define themselves as “poor” depending on how they feel about capitalism.

Again, several objections come to the fore. To begin with, this theoretical construct romanticizes “the poor” as a group of people who are interested in re-distributing wealth rather than in aiming to become part of those who relish in private property and the kind of subjectivity it makes possible. Taking the outbursts of xenophobic violence as a case in point, poverty obviously does not merely produce solidarity and political love, as Hardt and Negri insist, but also produces enormous amounts of “love gone bad” – to stick to their terminology – in the form of fear, hate and frustration (Commonwealth 195). Secondly, by claiming that poverty revolves around attitudes towards property, one basically suggests that being poor is a sort of lifestyle, whereas what this re-casting of class blatantly leaves out is that it is extremely difficult to be regarded as productive and valuable, to be recognizable as such in the first place, if one cannot inscribe oneself into the dominant property logic, simply because one is structurally rendered incapable of doing so by socio-historical circumstances. Rather than cutting “diagonally across [the] false alternatives – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist” and opening up a “new political space,” then, the description of poverty as attitude-dependent merely re-inscribes it as a metaphor (Commonwealth ix). As I have suggested with regard to Mbigi and Maree’s notion of ubuntu as the solidarity of the poor, the use of ubuntu/poverty as a metaphor, by grouping different interests, strategies and circumstances under a single term, problematically glosses over differences that exist among poor people in favour of an opaque grouping of these differences along the lines of affect, in this case, solidarity as a re-politicisation of love. Although these are indeed serious impediments to the effectivity of Hardt and Negri’s argument, I will, in the next section, focus on the productive side of considering “the poor” as a group in search of change in the public sphere by analysing the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement.

Strategic Tactics and Tactical Strategies: Ubuntu as Politics in Abahlali baseMjondolo (The Durban Shack Dwellers Movement)

Against the backdrop of the pogroms of May 2008, some of the critiques on Hardt and Negri voiced above need to be reconsidered. The development of an organisa-
tion called Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), also known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement, suggests, for instance, that responses to poverty can indeed be organised through the “powers of invention and production” of “the poor” as a group, rather than through a fixed conception of the poor as “generally useless, dirty ... and the shack-dwellers as a mindless, instinctual, antisocial mass” (Commonwealth 180; Gibson 704). Gibson explicitly relates the rise of this movement to the riots:

Both [the development of the pogroms and of Abahlali] have arisen as responses to increasing pauperization and spatial and political exclusion, but the pogroms are also a consequence of the criminalization, repression and the depoliticization of shack revolts by the police and governmental authorities. (704)

As Gibson points out, the xenophobic attacks were not only triggered by the dire circumstances of large parts of the South African population, but also by the way in which these people have been treated by governmental authorities. In those settlements, however, where the shack dwellers movement had a large presence, there were significantly fewer attacks (705; Neocosmos 593; Pithouse, “May 2008 Pogroms”).

AbM is a movement that focuses on a local politics of improving the material circumstances of poor people living in shacks, but aims to do so through a reformulation of the South African political framework at the local level. As Gibson points out, AbM is horizontally organized and has worked out a politics that avoids a reliance on representative democracy as much as possible, because these conventional channels proved unfruitful (704; see also Bryant 59). The movement has grown out of (and has known a steady growth of members and affiliates ever since) the protests by a group of shack dwellers from Kennedy Road, Durban, that resulted in an agreement with the city of Durban, which planned to relocate the community to the city’s outskirts as a result of the “slum clearance programme” that came into effect as of 2001. The planned relocation to the rural outskirts of Durban would make it insurmountably expensive and difficult for the inhabitants to provide for their own livelihoods. After extensive campaigning, the city agreed to not clear the area, but, instead, invest in the improvement of the quality of living conditions in the settlement as it was. However,

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23 For an account of how elections and meetings are conducted within AbM, and for information on the political affiliations of the members of the movement in Kennedy Road that started AbM, see Bryant’s “Towards Delivery and Dignity: Community Struggle from Kennedy Road.”

24 Many people in informal settlements do not have money to pay for transport into town, so despite the fact that the current dwellings are located next to a dumpsite and rife with the
promises were not kept, and more resistance emerged, especially because the decisions taken by the municipality were not discussed with the community in question (Bryant 53-4; Hsiao and Lim 314; see also Pithouse, “Struggle”). The members of AbM have been adamant ever since that poor people should be visible and, thus, knowable and recognizable as political agents in the decisions that concern them.

The politics of AbM, which its elected president S’bu Zikode has described as a “politics of the poor,” combines a Hardt and Negrian approach to the poor as productive of social change with an emphasis on the importance of ubuntu (Zikode qtd. in Pithouse, “Politics” 82). As Zikode elucidates in one of his interviews, AbM is based on the premise that it is “common sense that everyone is equal, that everyone matters, that the world must be shared” (Revolutionary Ubuntu 34). Zikode adds:

My understanding is that this common sense comes from the very new spirit of ubuntu, from the spirit of humanity, from the understanding of what is required for a proper respect of each person’s dignity, of what they are required to do. (Revolutionary Ubuntu 34)

By applying ubuntu to the case of the shack dwellers in this way, Zikode effectively outlines the drive behind the movement’s social cohesion: according to Zikode, ubuntu means that every person needs to be heard and respected, but this also implies that social engagement is both necessary and expected. This train of thought is reflected in the form of the movement. Since it was founded as a result of many poor people’s frustration with the ANC’s failure to deliver constructive change at a local level – in other words, with elected leaders that are supposed to represent their community, but do nothing or very little to actually improve their lot – AbM is structured with as little representation as possible. Where in a representative democracy the decision-making process is delegated to those voted into power, direct democracy, or rather, the more direct democracy of AbM is meant to ensure that its members are involved in the making of decisions during community meetings. These meetings are problematic consequences of high unemployment rates and poverty, “the settlement is a hopeful place: near to town and to employment, near schools where children can learn English, and in a middle-class neighborhood where even casual employment out pays anything available in most rural areas [sic]” (Bryant 53).

It is striking that Zikode describes the spirit of ubuntu as “very new,” which contradicts basically every other opinion on the subject. It also contradicts another part of the interview where he talks about ubuntu being taught in schools and being part of Zulu education during the State of Emergency and the period of transition (Revolutionary Ubuntu 23).
based on the idea that issues will be discussed until consensus is reached and only in the case of those issues on which consensus cannot be reached does the movement resort to decision making through majority rule by putting them to the vote. These decisions are then communicated to the executive committee by the committees that represent the different settlements (Bryant, esp. 61, 66).26

The striving for consensus is a form of internal politics that is consistent with what Dirk Louw has described as “African traditional democracy” and equates with ubuntu. According to Louw, ubuntu accords primary importance to “agreement or consensus”:

Although there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of an agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. (“Assessment” n. pag.)

From this perspective, besides the obvious presence of a president, the movement’s form further underlines, as also became clear from the analysis of Ubuntu Linux, that ubuntu and notions of leadership and authority often work in tandem. More specifically, it suggests that hierarchy is a part of decision-making processes in ubuntu thought because someone obviously has to decide what counts as consensus and when it is reached. This notion of consensus is, of course, diametrically opposed to Jacques Rancière’s use of the term in his theory of politics, which is based on the notion of difference and which works against the unifying practices of “the police.” In “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics” Rancière writes:

Consensus does not simply mean the agreement of the political parties or of social partners on the common interests of the community. It means that the givens of any collective situation are objectified in such a way that they can no longer lend themselves to a dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world. (48)

Bringing the notion of traditional consensus up against Rancière’s notion of the term is crucial, because it makes visible that AbM indeed relies on a unifying gesture internal to its movement, but that it does so in order to actually formulate a “polemical framing of a controversial world,” and thus to effect difference. Through consensus it aims at forming a more effective political body which expresses dissent in the face of

26 Ironically, this structure is very similar to that of the ANC. Just like the ANC, AbM as of 2008 also has a Women’s League (“AbM Women’s League”) and a Youth League (“Abahlali Youth League”).
government policies that take the serious form of what could be called a post-apartheid variant of “forced removals.” In other words, it is exactly in this unifying gesture – which, it must be added, is formed on the basis of a possibility for the attendees of the community meetings to speak for themselves and to come up with their own solutions – that AbM’s tactical move becomes most visible. AbM’s decision-making process is based on different views, but is unified to a single course of action which is thus strategically formed by its members (in the sense that it creates a circumscribed space in which action can be formulated), but implements this action tactically in a political field in which the movement fights for making the dominant system, literally, inhabitable for poor people. As such, this movement makes visible, through a reliance on ubuntu, that strategy and tactics, as formulated by de Certeau, cannot be strictly separated, and can even exist and function simultaneously within certain practices.

In the case of AbM, the relations between strategy and tactics never take definite shape because, as Zikode explains, AbM’s policy is reflected in and dependent on, one could even say united with, the movement’s form, which is always in flux:

Therefore learning Abahlalism demands, in its nature, the form that it takes. It doesn’t require one to adopt some ideas and approach from outside. When you pull all the different people together and make sure that everyone fits in, that it is everyone’s home, that’s when it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics and leadership. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility of thinking, able to deal with its uniqueness. It gives us the strength to support each other, to keep thinking together, to keep fighting together. (Revolutionary Ubuntu 34)

The social cohesion of Abahlali, in other words, both comes from and depends on the need to “make sure that everyone fits in” – an effort to make potentially everybody at home in the movement that underlines ubuntu as hospitality towards a stranger that is other and different, yet recognizable as a potential guest. The equal recognition of and respect for every person requires “a flexibility in thinking” that adapts to the uniqueness of every situation. In line with the idea of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, the way people relate to each other is in flux and depends on what is at stake in these relations. As such, a politics that defines itself through ubuntu, if it aims to be vigilant about power relations and different interests, needs to constantly renegotiate the bonds that make its decisions possible. It is this effort itself, Zikode suggests, that is produced by and productive of the movement’s social cohesion. Like Hardt and Negri elucidate in Commonwealth in relation to love as a political force (see 189-199,
esp. 195), Zikode stresses that this is a kind of political practice that does not come naturally. It needs to be acquired through education, by “learning Abahlalism” in the struggle for equality itself, rather than by imbibing externally imposed knowledge. This is why the movement also refers to itself as the University of Abahlali (“University of AbM”).

The notions of constant renegotiation of different opinions and interests and of education in what it means to form a social movement are also present in Hardt and Negri’s concept of political love. In Commonwealth, they specify their concept in opposition to how it is most commonly represented and thought of, namely as “spontaneous or passive” (180). Instead, they argue:

It does not simply happen to us, as if it were an event that mystically arrives from elsewhere. Instead, it is an action, a biopolitical event, planned and realized in common. (Commonwealth 180)

Especially the relation of political love to the common is crucial in Hardt and Negri’s conception, who describe political love as “a process of the production of the common and the production of subjectivity” (180). Similar to the focus on the importance of relations in ubuntu theory, as well as to Zikode’s application of the term, Hardt and Negri emphasise that this process “is not merely a means to producing material goods and other necessities but also in itself an end” (180). Following Spinoza’s concept of love, they describe it as “the increase of our power to act and think, together with the recognition of an external cause” (181). Love is a way of forming a relation to the cause of our joy that seeks to repeat and expand it, which, at the same time, results in “new, more powerful bodies and minds” (181). As such, political love can be said to both produce and hold together the common.

As we have seen, however, in the context of Ahmed’s conclusion that objects, subject, or terms are pitted against others through the circulation of affect, love is not an unambiguous process. Indeed, Hardt and Negri also note that it is “deeply ambivalent and susceptible to corruption” (182). Productive love can easily be distorted by a problematic association with sameness, where love for the same (identitarian love) or love as becoming the same (love as a process of unification) result in forms of love that create, as de Certeau would put it, their own “proper,” their own delineated in- and outside (Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth 182-3). Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the outburst of xenophobic violence repeatedly referred to above and Ahmed’s analysis of the circulation of affect, love and solidarity within one group often leads to the
projection of hate on its externalised other. This leads Ahmed to conclude, as I have mentioned, in one of the last chapters of The Cultural Politics of Emotion, that

There is no good love that, in speaking its name, can change the world into the referent for that name. But in the resistance to speaking in the name of love, in the recognition that we do not simply act out of love, and in the understanding that love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel, we can find perhaps a different kind of line or connection between the others we care for, and the world to which we want to give shape. (141)

So, it is only through an awareness of the circumstances and circulation of the conditions of love, Ahmed suggests, that there might be a possibility to imagine a different way of relating to others. It is striking, however, as I mentioned earlier, that she proposes we redefine our relations to “the others we care for,” which emphasises the bonds to those already close to us, whereas Hardt and Negri would surely insist on deeming such a perspective on love equally identitarian to the one Ahmed is trying to get away from.

Indeed, as Hardt and Negri claim, such a notion of corrupted love can only be countered by formulating the concept of love as something that can be influenced through an active engagement with it:

When we think of the power of love, we need constantly to keep in mind that there are no guarantees; there is nothing automatic about its functioning and results. ... The struggle to combat evil thus involves a training or education in love. (Commonwealth 195)

To be sure, the distinction that Hardt and Negri make between “love” and “evil” is not as clear-cut as they suggest here, but their take on the concept of love is potentially productive. Indeed, love is subject to specific socio-historically determined circulations of affect, as suggested by Ahmed, but this also implies it is subject to change. Exactly because affect circulates, or rather, in terms of Hardt and Negri, because love is not a given, but a corruptible process that can “go bad,” the positive and productive side of political love becomes visible. Despite the problematic construction of their argument through the notions of the common, the multitude and, especially “the poor,” then, the way some of their concepts come to the fore in the organisation of AbM also suggests there is something that we can take away from Hardt and Negri’s
attempt to actively formulate a tactical response to how people who appear to have no voice are interpellated by authority and/or Capital.

Indeed, in his ecosocialist manifesto *The Enemy of Nature*, Joel Kovel regards AbM, with its demand that resources are made public and shared, as an attempt to recreate the Commons, in which materials are regarded in terms of usage rather than ownership (251-2). Although the terms “public” and “ownership” still raise the question as to what and who this kind of social organization does and does not include, AbM’s struggle for “a new emancipatory structure where we are not stakeholders but people; where land is for everyone and where resources are shared rather than fought over” has also won them something, like not being relocated and offering the ability to people from all walks of life to become politically involved in the issues of the community (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 5). In this sense, the example of AbM recasts the critique formulated against Hardt and Negri’s treatment of poverty as a matter of attitude rather than of material lack in positive terms. Although Hardt and Negri’s approach remains a one-sided one, in which the generalizing move of describing the poor as a group of people with a certain attitude towards the redistribution of property sidesteps the consequences of their material or cultural diversity, Abahlali’s organisation and results suggest that an ubuntu-based politics could work by continuously adjusting the form and content of its politics according to the specific issues that poverty and property raise in certain places.

If anything, AbM demonstrates, contra the critique on Hardt and Negri voiced above, that “the poor,” or at least, some poor people, actually are interested in a common striving for the redistribution of wealth and of developing themselves actively, rather than “just” relying on and becoming part of the system. The movement shows that they are political agents in dire need of and actively striving for emancipation. What is more, AbM does so through addressing very specific, local issues that concern both the material conditions in which its members live, as well as the way these issues are addressed by the authorities. On the other hand, one could also say that they strive for these changes exactly so that they can more fully access what society has to offer them in its current structure. All the same, they do so through a redefined political process of engagement, based on the notion of ubuntu, in which differences within the body of the members are not glossed over, but are integrated in the decision-making process. Because AbM functions through a notion of consensus which engages with opposing opinions, but simultaneously uses these differences to strategically form a unified form of action, a structure emerges that respects difference and negotiates it until consensus is reached with regard to how the convergence of different interests is served best. As such, the movement does not seem to be about
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achieving unity per se, but, rather, about constantly and tactically repositioning itself – through an ubuntu-inspired form of communication – according to the issues that arise amongst its members.

Concluding Remarks

In recent years, ubuntu has structurally emerged in a new kind of “marketised” guise. This is reason for optimism, because the spread of a term like ubuntu all over the globe carries with it an emphasis on the integrity of human relations on all levels of daily life. At the same time, the ways in which it has travelled have also caused concern. As we have seen in the analysis of the BP commercial, ubuntu has come to the fore as something that only certain stereotyped people adhere to (in this case, black, African women, especially mothers). The positive affect released through the humorous use of ubuntu only serves to reinforce the stereotypes that carry this message and recasts the word as a notion chained to certain racial, gender and class assumptions. In addition, we have seen that the positivity that almost all uses of ubuntu seek to emphasise has come to be aligned with a cultural capitalistic need for ethical action. However, aligning or sticking the affects of solidarity, respect and sharing that are present in ubuntu with or to certain products that alleviate the consumer’s negative feelings about his or her complicity in the scope of capitalism, potentially serves to deepen the divisions already present in this economy – an economy of affect as well as of material lack. What is enlarged through the circulation of affect, after all, is not only affect itself, as pointed out by Ahmed, but also the differences on which it is based.

Even so, the reliance on ubuntu as a possibility to improve the ways in which people relate to each other and the ways in which affects circulate comes to the surface again and again. In the case of Abahlali baseMjondolo we have seen that this affect attached to ubuntu can function as an incentive for change as well. AbM’s premise that every person is equal, important, and should be respected leads to a different way of conducting and governing daily affairs, which, in the case of AbM, is based on and aimed at rethinking property along the lines of sharing rather than those of private ownership. Like Hardt and Negri’s notion of the multitude, this movement aims to effect change through a redefinition of what poverty means and of installing agency in those who are poor. If AbM sticks to its current course and continues to effect success in their daily struggle, this is cause for hope that change can indeed be initiated from within a system that has a hold over all of those who live in it.
The biggest loophole here, to be sure, is that both the pragmatic politics of AbM and the theory of Hardt and Negri, with their emphasis on solidarity and political love, pit their argument against a common enemy: neoliberal societal structures and the people that maintain them. Unfortunately, then, as successful and ideal as both these strategies of thought and action may sound, they bring us back to what seems to be the eternal problem of community formation as formulated by Arjun Appadurai, namely that any social formation needs an external, negatively defined factor, established “through the dynamics of stereotyping and identity contrast,” against which the coherence of the community in question can be positively constructed (50). This might be a problem that can only be tackled in the same way it is produced, namely through a reflection on the conditions of its production and the role affect plays in the conditions of coherence.

As became clear from AbM’s internal structure, cohesion depends on flux and the continual renegotiation of relations between people in the achievement of a common goal. This results in a politics in which goals are not delimited and guarantees do not exist because the goal, like the course of action, changes along with the fluctuation of relationships on which these matters depend. One can be sure, however, that this, too, is not an unambiguous process. The line between strategy and tactics is paper-thin, which is to say that one cannot exist without the other. Tactics need a system to poach upon, whereas the system that is strategically imposed is made stronger by the fact that tactics make this system livable. In all likelihood, AbM’s format should be considered constructive for some who feel safe and appreciated by its politics, yet repressive for others, who might have alternative views on how politics functions. Looking for a use of ubuntu as a tactic thus involves the attempt to avoid falling into the trap of becoming strategic in a repressive and authoritative sense, even if this movement also underlines what also became clear from Chapter 2 and 3, namely that a conceptual and material strategy of circumscription and unity can provide a secure and safe space from which to relate to others more effectively.

In the case of Ubuntu Linux, the very focus on a respectful and collaborative work environment, in other words, on the importance of practicing ubuntu in one’s labour-related actions as an improvement of the current capitalistic approach to labour relations, simultaneously obscures the circulation of commodities and capital in this process. Žižek argues that such an apparent shift in focus from commodity fetishism (relations between things) to relations between people reinforces commodity fetishism and thus strengthens the capitalist system. According to him, the separation of these two relations from each other is thus necessary in order for people to think the possibility of their freedom from this capitalistic system.
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It has been repeatedly argued here, however, especially by reference to Ahmed’s argument concerning the circulation of affect, that an individual’s materiality cannot be thought separately from his or her relational circumstances. Hardt and Negri’s insistence that a change in the attitudes towards others and material conditions (especially property) can result in new ways of organizing global politics helps to think this entwinement of relationality and materiality, despite, or rather because of the fact that their approach throws into relief the serious problem of glossing over differences amongst people, their circumstances and their opinions. As Ruddick convincingly argues, Hardt and Negri’s one-sided approach seriously delimits the possibilities of affect in a political context. Tactically speaking, then, the most promising instance of what could be called “applied ubuntu” seems to be that of AbM, which, as a movement, seems to recognize that as far as negotiations go, there can be no blueprint for relations. In a very concrete sense, this demonstrates that ubuntu as a concept cannot possibly remain stable or the same, not even in one place, except, perhaps, as a reflection of the desire to respect difference when faced with various and colliding interests and to achieve their convergence.