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Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

Stuit, H.H.

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Afterword



Figure 19. Ubuntu Security sign in Pretoria, South Africa.

This photo, which was taken in Pretoria in the summer (South African winter) of 2011, rather surprisingly and succinctly ties together the main issues that have come to the fore in the exploration of ubuntu undertaken in this dissertation. At the time, it merely struck me as ironic that a sign with the word “ubuntu” on it would be posted to communicate a message of warning and threat as well as of protection, but as this project drew to its provisional end, I became increasingly familiar with such an ambiguous use of the term. Meaning kept accumulating on this particular image.

First of all, it reiterates the dynamic between inclusion and exclusion that was evident in all of the preceding chapters. So far, this is the most explicit image I have encountered, however, where the word ubuntu functions like a boundary marker, in the sense that it is actually *stuck to* a boundary, posted as it is to a gate surrounding private property that literally circumscribes and fences this property off from the outside world.

As such the image calls up the association with the role of private property in how ubuntu has been appropriated for use on the market, in management and in business policies. As became clear from Chapter 4, the focus on human relations in ubuntu can obscure the fact that what is actually at stake is not the quality of these relations, but the enhancement of competitive advantage and the protection of acquired property. Alternatively, ubuntu is referred to as a survival strategy common amongst poor people, who through sharing and group solidarity, attempt to counter the deprivation caused by material lack. In both these uses of the term, ubuntu is posited as a strategy of accumulation.

In the above image, the word “ubuntu” is, of course, directed at those inside the fence and refers to ubuntu’s emphasis on intersubjective harmony. It extends the idea that, in ubuntu thought, people take care of each other and support each other, to the promise of reliable and unconditional service in case of emergency reflected in the phrase “24 hour response.” The way ubuntu is communicated to those outside the fence is, of course, decidedly different, although not immediately evident from the use of the word. Will the burglar be apprehended in a humane fashion? Does ubuntu security mean that the intruders will not be hurt? Or does it mean that the property will not be protected at all because it serves the common good to loot the house? As such, this image also foregrounds the possibility of pervertibility of the notion of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests that I have developed in this dissertation.

This notion of pervertibility calls to mind the issue of responsibility. On the one hand, responsibility in ubuntu has come to the fore as a necessity to take an interest in the common good of whatever community one belongs to, from which ubuntu emerges as a decidedly moralistic value. In this guise, ubuntu can come to function, as it did in the TRC, as a future perfect, where a particular view on an imagined common past is projected into the future as an idealized goal, in this case, reconciliation and national unity. On the other hand, the issue of responsibility in ubuntu was also conceived, related as it is to the notion of hospitality, as a radical openness to what is “strange” or “foreign” to the community. From this perspective, responsibility emerges as an attitude from the perspective of which not knowing what to do is actually a condition for what Spivak has called responsible action in her description of the

future anterior, where the past, present, and future are all undecidable and marked by uncertainty.

With regard to Ndebele's call that such uncertainty might provide a responsible way to construct relations and solutions in the public sphere, it is important to emphasise that the ways people are positioned relationally, but also historically, discursively or economically, affect their ability to rely on a notion like uncertainty. In ubuntu, especially in its formulation as a convergence of interests, responsibility comes to the fore as a negotiation of the interests at play, but also of the dynamic between receptivity and closed fences. In this sense the phrase "ubuntu security" is particularly relevant, because it brings to the fore the fundamental problem of safety and security. Not having a door to open, not having access to a safeguarded existence, not having the security of communal networks, all seriously impede the possibility to partake in ubuntu's call for openness and respect for otherness, an otherness that is, as I have repeatedly argued, not absolute, but rests on the observation that, in ubuntu thought, an other is always recognizable as someone to whom the subject can relate, in terms of hospitality, or otherwise.

To formulate ubuntu as a staking out of one's own relational position with a sense of receptiveness that invites others into the subject's experience is thus not intended to strike a happy medium. The relating subject is influenced by contingent factors that cannot always be placed in a shared frame of reference. Yet, at the same time, the unsharability of experience is sometimes exactly what ties people together and in this way, what is uncertain or undecidable is also an opportunity to reformulate given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating. Recognising this double stance as the subject's activation in any relational matrix is a dire necessity that flows from the recognition that the actualisation of hospitality towards others is always dependent on a distribution of power that has to be negotiated, even if the different uses of ubuntu invariably emphasise a universalistic pull towards unconditional openness and a pursuit of harmony. As such, it becomes possible to think of ubuntu as a recognition and emancipation of other people from absolute otherness to strangers, who are different in their specificity, but still very recognizable as guests. If this seems a position formulated from a perspective of assumed authority (and property), I would like to reiterate, keeping Krog's poetry in mind, that ubuntu's conundrum of negotiating the absolute with the specific can only be navigated through an awareness that the subject and its very capability to relate to others emerges in the negotiation of different experiences within particular discursive fields.

The above also makes clear, however, that such a phrasing of ubuntu is itself not free of issues of authority and domination. As has been repeatedly emphasised in this

dissertation, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint where a strategic use of discourse ends and a tactical one begins. The distinction is really a matter of perspective dependent on where authority is located. As such, this distinction has helped to lend visibility to the hierarchical dimensions of ubuntu and the vectors of power within its discourse. I have tried to thematise issues of authority in specific situations, most notably in the case studies about Zanele Muholi, the commodifications of ubuntu and ubuntu's political use in the TRC, but also in the Durban Shack Dwellers movement, in order to assess when ubuntu's drive for peaceful solutions might be considered politically productive in the emergence and maintenance of open and inclusive relations, but also when it hampers the development of such relations or, alternatively, constructs these bonds as restrictive and repressive for the people in them. By making the underlying, often power-related elements of ubuntu visible, I have tried to show that ubuntu's most important and perhaps most ethical value is that it can be a concept that allows us to think relational openness and close(d)ness critically.

Speaking of closeness, notions of intimacy and the body have played a significant role in the arguments I have made with regard to most of the case studies in this dissertation, specifically those of Krog, Gordimer, Coetzee, Muholi and Ndebele. These notions are important because they underline the embodied aspects of relating to one's surroundings and point towards the question of how relationality is *mediated*, while acknowledging the fact that this mediation is, at the same time, constructive of relationality. In two particular case studies, namely that of Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series, the question of mediation and its relation to ubuntu has been particularly pronounced, if not exhaustively discussed.

In *Age of Iron*, the narrative technique of the novel proved to be vital for the interpretation of the plot. The narrative voice is overwhelmingly confessional and, as such, draws the reader in through a suggestion of overhearing that borders on voyeurism, but at the same time alienates because of an, at times, overpowering intimate candour that makes the reader wince. As such, the narration does not merely reflect the protagonist's problems to relate to her surroundings, but, more generally, raises the issue of *how* we do this. It places emphasis on the norms and values we disseminate when we relate to others, verbally or otherwise, and, by revealing the selective and exclusive qualities of these values, foregrounds the difficulties and problems involved in extending sympathy and openness to others that may offend one's sensibility.

In the case of Zanele Muholi's photography the issue is slightly different. There, the specific question arises whether photography is capable of triggering what Emmanuel Levinas has called the ethical injunction. Can a photograph trigger a sense of responsibility in its viewer? Levinas claims it cannot because representation dilutes the

originary ethical meeting that takes place in the face to face between self and other. The analysis of Muholi's work, however, suggests it can. By relying on the power of the grouping of individual portraits to create awareness in the viewer for the plight of black queers in South Africa, Muholi aims for a political effect. In this sense, both case studies deal with the effect of representation on how ubuntu and relationality can be perceived and point towards the possible political importance of thinking the inter-relationship between mediation and relationality.

By way of conclusion I would like to return to the image of "Ubuntu Security," which succinctly depicts the fine line that this dissertation traces in ubuntu thought between a need for personal security through mechanisms of exclusion and the possibility and necessity of extending such security to others by opening up set boundaries. More precisely, it shows how ubuntu revolves around finding the balance between enclosure and openness, inclusion and exclusion, and security and insecurity. It foregrounds the possibility to perceive elements that are often thought of as diametrically opposed as interrelated, interdependent and mutually constructive. Based as it is on the notions of personhood and humanity, ubuntu, as it has emerged from this study, recognises that the concept of an essentially shared common humanity is both deeply problematic and absolutely necessary in the creation and maintenance of more equal and caring relations. This irreducible critical tension posits ubuntu as a continuous negotiation of people's various interests and, thus, as a constant re-invention of the category of the "human" and the "humane."

In any case, ubuntu in all its guises – whether these be strategic, tactical, or both – even if some of these guises run the risk of turning into a repressive morality themselves – offers the opportunity to acknowledge and to give shape to the unavoidable interdependence of human relations on all levels of daily life. In this way, it also offers ways to make repressive systems inhabitable. To think about ubuntu is to face the circumference of one's own norms and values about what it means to relate to others as a human being. It is this aspect of ubuntu and its ability, to paraphrase de Certeau, to (re)organize spaces, languages, relations or material realities, whether on a minute or a vast scale, that I would like to emphasise as I close.