Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

Stuit, H.H.

Publication date
2013

Summary

This study investigates how ubuntu – which is generally conceived of as an inter-personal dynamic that emphasises qualities like generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, a willingness to share and an interest in the common good – is continuously (re)shaped in contemporary South African cultures. The aim is to trace some of the historical contexts and objects that ubuntu has already encountered, but also to create contact with contexts and concepts pertaining to relationality, intersubjectivity and community that have not been related to it as of yet. These links between ubuntu and other concepts are actively created in order to keep essentialising gestures, both with regard to possible meanings of ubuntu and the division between Africa and the West that often accompanies it, at bay.

Such relations, whether old or new, are, however, not neutral. Even a brief glance at the history of South Africa suffices to raise awareness of the sites of contestation – by which I rather broadly mean colonialism and apartheid – and the violence that resulted from the asymmetrical power relations on which they are based. It is in such contexts of violence and conflict that ubuntu's crucial value as a drive for peaceful solutions comes to the fore most forcefully. These contexts also make clear that ubuntu, like any other concept, is itself also invested with certain power relations and is "never simply descriptive, but rather, programmatic and normative" (Bal, "Working" 8). This is why this dissertation relies on a discursive approach of ubuntu, which, through its acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of power in everyday practices, is pre-eminently suitable to think critically about the acknowledgment, and as such about the provision of space in which to give shape to the inevitable embedding of people in their surroundings, whether social, cultural, environmental, historical, political, or all of the above.

The starting point of this study's analysis of the various and widespread appropriations of ubuntu is the fraught context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The way ubuntu comes to the fore in the TRC's implementation of a discourse of reconciliation and national unity offers a crucial opportunity to see the term "at work" and foregrounds the necessity to think of ubuntu as a specific discourse with a distinct working practice. Although ubuntu existed long before this process of dramatic political and social transition was initiated, its link to the notion of forgiveness in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation has brought ubuntu to the

forefront in a specifically dominant way that resonates in many subsequent uses and investigations of the term.

The first chapter sets out to explicate the use of ubuntu that emanated from the Commission's directive, before moving on to a discussion of how ubuntu became interrelated with forgiveness as the preferred mode of interaction between victims and perpetrators in the process of reconciliation and nation-building. From Desmond Tutu's autobiographical work and his influence on some of the Commission's most "famous" hearings, forgiveness is staged as exemplary in the achievement of reconciliation and the creation of new communal bonds. From this staging ubuntu emerges as caught between two highly entangled discursive strategies: one in which it facilitates the rehabilitation of the dignity of victims of human rights violations in an individualized and psychological dynamic, and one in which it promotes an adherence to this dynamic as beneficial, even necessary, for the nationalistic project of reconciliation. The interrelation of these stagings, I argue, revolves around a contradictory use of the notion of common humanity that is claimed to be all-inclusive yet installs, at the same time, a benchmark for a moral standard.

It is from within this double bind of ubuntu in the TRC process that alternative formulations also become possible. Through a discussion of a number of poems from "land van genade en verdriet," a group of poems by South African poet, journalist and scholar Antjie Krog, forgiveness is read not strictly as a tool for nation-building, but more generally as a subjection to the norms and values in light of which forgiveness is asked for. Krog's vision on forgiveness, and especially its link to the idea of a "humane" language that recognizes people's vulnerability to (discursive) violence, makes clear that forgiveness can represent an uncritical acceptance of the discourse one is subjected to, but can also be a locus from which it becomes possible to change, or at the very least, act upon a dominant discourse while being positioned in it. This double position of the subject in language and discourse is then brought to bear on the formulation of forgiveness in one of the TRC meetings surrounding the Guguletu Seven case, which allows for a reading of ubuntu, not as an essentially shared humanity that is taken for granted, but rather one that posits ubuntu as a constant re-invention, through the negotiation of people's various interests, of what could be considered "human."

Chapter 2 further investigates ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests that emerged from ubuntu's double function in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation. This discourse promoted openness towards others, but simultaneously delimited this openness in order to provide social cohesion and stability in South Africa's transition period from apartheid to democracy, a time defined by a search for new frames

of reference. The chapter revolves around the questions of how, from the perspective of intersubjective relations, such a transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another takes place and how the notion of transition influences these relations.

In order to do so, the chapter discusses two novels: Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron. None to Accompany Me* introduces the possibility of thinking intersubjective and communal relations as clusters that change over time and that might have to be discarded in favour of new groupings. The novel underlines the influence of contingency and formulates profound ways to relate to others besides the possibilities offered by familial and sexual relations. These findings make it possible to think of ubuntu as a convergence of interests that counters the presentation of ubuntu as a future perfect, in which the insistent reference to ubuntu and common humanity as "lost" posits it as a reference to an idealized past and the need to recover ubuntu as a projection of this past into the future. The reliance on contingency introduces the notion of the future anterior, which takes the unknowability of both past and future into account and looks for a basis of responsible action in these conditions of uncertainty.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* confronts the reader with a balancing act that is the result of these two different attitudes towards the future. Although it shows that animosity between the characters can be redefined towards a feasible relationality despite chaos, conflict, and the impossibility of access to a common (discourse on the) past, it also clearly depicts that the ossification of communal boundaries in the novel result from a system that structurally disenfranchises the majority of its characters. As such, the notion of the past and the future as undecidable and open-ended is crucially refined by the suggestion that the ability, need or desire to relinquish a unified position and to communicate with other perspectives on the past besides one's own interpretation of it, is actually dependent on social privilege. On the other hand, the protagonist's bold reliance on hostile factors beyond her control as she moves closer to death suggests that converging interests are indeed difficult to negotiate, especially when high stakes are involved, but also foregrounds the importance of fluidity, contingency and undecidability in shaping relations to others in the absence of a shared frame of reference. From this perspective, ubuntu is posited as an open-ended possibility for the future that aims to go beyond the existing makeup of given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating.

The third chapter traces what happens to the effectiveness of undecidability when the vulnerability it causes threatens the position of the subject in the public sphere on a daily basis. If contingency and undecidability are to be taken into account as serious values when signalling the need to focus on undecidability in ubuntu, what happens

to influences like responsibility and obligation? Through a focus on responsibility this chapter explores the possibility of thinking ubuntu as ethics. It investigates the emancipation of a certain subaltern group within the larger society of South Africa, whose rights are protected by law, but often trampled on in practice. In Zanele Muholi's photograph series *Faces and Phases* this call for emancipation takes the form of the representation of a symbiotic relation between black queer individuals and their community, which functions as an ethical injunction towards its viewers. Muholi's response to the violence befalling her direct community, apart from being an attempt to trigger a sense of individual responsibility, is particularly relevant in the context of ubuntu because it portrays the ethical moment not as a concurrence between the two isolated (and thus circumscribed) instances of self and other, but, recognises that those who are present in the face to face encounter are, prior to this moment, already part of relational constellations.

Thus, it forms an ubuntu-oriented alternative to the ethically vertiginous responsibility in Levinas, for whom any relation besides the absolute responsibility to the other represents complicity in a betrayal of ethical purity. This difference between ubuntu and Levinasian responsibility foregrounds the value of and necessity for a concept like ubuntu as a convergence of interests because it approaches this complicity as an activation of the individual's relation to his/her surroundings rather than as a paralyzing contradiction that jars the individual's agency. A reading of Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* makes visible that the notion of inevitable complicity is in constant need of re-negotiation, which takes the shape of a tactical re-evaluation of the character's involvement in the dominant relations that already determine their everyday lives. This novella is pertinent here because it posits a notion of community that reflects on and allows for fluctuation, yet also keeps track of the regenerative potential of communality and the responsibilities implied in maintaining relational ties.

Since the idea of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, which are located in a particular time and space and which need to be responsibly negotiated, can help to give shape to the way we are related and actively relate to others, the focus shifts, in the fourth chapter, to explicit expressions of ubuntu in the public domain. The aim is to find out, by tracing some of the effects of the popularity of ubuntu, what these uses tell us about the concept and its potential for social and communal cohesion. Chapter 4 argues that affect plays a crucial role in the interpretation of the use of ubuntu in "market-oriented" approaches, which seem to have become an increasingly dominant feature of ubuntu's dissemination globally. Through a discussion of the role of affect in the way the fair trade product Ubuntu Cola is marketed and a critique of what seems to be a more general reliance in marketing and management discourses on the imple-

mentation of ubuntu as a strategy that is supposed to enlarge competitive advantage, I argue that ubuntu contains a hidden reference to the notion of private property, exactly because of its dominant associations of sharing and group solidarity.

As becomes clear from the analysis of the Ubuntu Linux computer operating system, relationality can come to be regarded as separated from material relations. Through a discussion of Žižek's interpretation of commodity fetishism, I argue that the relations between "things," however, are inextricably bound to and made possible by the relations between people. This premise of the unavoidable connection between things and people is used to find points of entry from which to begin an analysis of how ubuntu can serve to think how people can effect and affect these alignments between relationality and materiality in their dealings with each other.

The final section and case study of this dissertation deals with the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement. This organisation 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, continuously opposes the strategic discourse of dispossession and relocation that is imposed on its members by making this system, literally, inhabitable and workable for one of South Africa's most disenfranchised social groups. In doing so, constantly re-negotiates 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 a politics of ubuntu.

In combination the chapters show how the ever shifting meaning of ubuntu is based on a balancing act between openness and close(d)ness, inclusion and exclusion, and security and insecurity. More precisely, they show how ubuntu revolves around finding the balance between these polarities and foreground the possibility to perceive of elements that are often thought of as diametrically opposed as inter-related, interdependent and mutually constructive. Ubuntu, as it 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 equal and caring relations. This seems to be a critical tension that is impossible to solve, but it does foreground 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." 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. In this sense, any investigation of ubuntu also reflects on, mediates between and actively constructs relations between people.