

HANNEKE STUIT

‘THERE’S A NATION UNITED’  
ON THE INTERACTION OF AFFECT AND DISCOURSE IN  
SHIFTING SIGNIFICATIONS OF UBUNTU

Krisis 2014, Issue 2

[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

What is ubuntu and why talk about it now? Reasons are manifold. The Southern African concept of ubuntu is a powerful philosophy of community and belonging that has been crucial to the history of South Africa. With its focus on social harmony and unity, ubuntu can provide a useful tool for thinking through problems of social in/exclusion, antagonism and conflict, not just in South Africa, but in other heterogeneous societies as well. Ubuntu provides a number of productive overlaps and differences with Western ethically-oriented concepts like responsibility and hospitality and can thus enrich both traditions, opening an avenue to reduce the gap between Western and African philosophy. Like this crude division between the West and Africa, however, ubuntu itself is not an unproblematic term, especially with regard to community formations. As will also become clear from what is to follow, ubuntu can easily be used as a boundary marker for belonging. Despite its deeply humanistic content, it

can come to function socially as a yardstick for determining who belongs to certain communities and who does not. These issues have been explored elsewhere in greater detail (2013), and in the present article I want to take a closer look at how recent developments and changes in the way the word ubuntu has been used influence its meaning, as well as the affective charge associated with this meaning. But before expounding on the relation between ubuntu, discourse and affect, it is necessary to explain in further detail what ubuntu is.

Ubuntu is generally conceived of as an interpersonal dynamic described by the Zulu and Xhosa proverb ‘a person is a person because of and through other people’ which emphasises qualities like generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, a willingness to share and an interest in the common good (Driver 2005: 219; Tutu 1999: 34-5). In South Africa, ubuntu is widespread. Although it has been around for centuries, its most famous use is probably its role in the creation of national unity shortly after the end of Apartheid. In the meantime, however, its uses have spread. It is now used as a guideline for the creation of competitive advantage in businesses as well as human resource management. Ubuntu also appears as a way to promote products, as a commodity in itself, or a service in the form of, for example, the Ubuntu Security company in Pretoria, Ubuntu liquor stores, the fair-trade Ubuntu cola and, last but not least, catchy logos on t-shirts. Today, it is becoming increasingly well-known across the globe, both in a commercialised form, and in its capacity of philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. A compelling example of how ubuntu has crossed South African borders is the Ubuntu distribution of Linux, which is an open-source software system based on sharing and cooperation.

It is often described as an intuitive concept, the meaning of which is not readily available for conscious reasoning. It is said that it is difficult to understand until one sees how it works in practice. Generally, ubuntu reflects a way of life, ‘a spiritual foundation, an inner state, an orientation, and a good disposition that motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others’ (Saule qtd. in Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 217). Definitions of ubuntu are multiple and vary depending on who works with the term (for an overview, see 2013), but it is safe

to say that it implies a striving for social harmony and a positive disposition towards others, as quoted directly above. As I will argue later in this article, it is exactly this positive feeling towards others that will prove crucial in the changes that ubuntu has undergone in the last twenty years. Although my case-studies are by no means exhaustive or representative of what seems to be a broader change within ubuntu, their comparison does reveal an important shift within the South African context. First, I will discuss the use of ubuntu in the Truth and Reconciliation process, where it was used to denote a positive adherence to the process of forgiveness and reconciliation in the aftermath of Apartheid in the 1990s. The second case-study revolves around a very specific use of the term in a commercial from 2009, where ubuntu is used to comic effect, yet also in the setting of a national endeavour. By looking at these two guises of ubuntu through the lens of affect theory and by making their affective connotations explicit, I hope to make visible how ubuntu has circulated in this particular cultural setting. Specifically, I want to show how some of its uses after the end of Apartheid slide problematically over the divisive and offensive social categories that make its meaning possible. I will argue that these categories in the use of ubuntu are maintained through an interaction between the term's discursive construction and what I will call ubuntu's affective connotations.

## Affect and Signification

Looking at the transformations of ubuntu is not only important for gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of ubuntu, but will also help to assess and think through what in recent theory seems to be a binary opposition between the realms of affective experience on the one hand, and that of signification and the workings of discourse on the other. This divide is made most explicit in the distinctions generally made between affect, emotions and feelings. According to authoritative texts by Gilles Deleuze and Silvan Tomkins, affect differs from both emotions and feelings because it is pre-cognitive. It is claimed that it 'precedes expression in words and operates independently' (Van Alphen 2008: 23). Brian Massumi, too, emphasises that it is important to separate affect from emotion,

where the latter pertains to 'the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal' (1995: 88). Affect, on the other hand, does not belong to anybody and is not recognizable before it is signified and made personal. This moment in which affect enters the realm of signification and discourse is clarified by Massumi's description of affect's place of residence, the plane of the virtual: 'The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt - albeit reduced and contained. For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously. One "wills" it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on socio-linguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one's life - by dint of inhibition.' (Massumi 1995: 91, emphasis in original). According to Massumi, this 'crowd' of possible manifestations of affect is crucial in understanding 'our information-and image-based late-capitalist culture' (1995: 88), but the problem is that no cultural-theoretical vocabulary yet exists that allows us to assess how the signification of affect works. Until that time, thinkers run the risk of allowing 'received psychological categories to slip back' into the way we think of affect, undoing its inassimilable potentiality (1995: 88). Because of this same reason, affect is, according to Massumi 'resistant to critique' (Massumi: 1995: 88).

As Ruth Leys rightfully suggests in her stinging discussion of Massumi in her article 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', deeming affect beyond critique is problematic. To place affect outside the socio-linguistic realm causes a disconnection between affect and ideology which potentially displaces the importance and necessity of signification and representation. As Leys puts it, the claim that individuals have 'subpersonal material-affective responses' (2011: 450) to which the mind is always half-a-second too late in responding, accords a secondary role to 'ideas and beliefs in politics, culture and art' (2011: 451). Later in her article, when critiquing Sedgwick's use of affect, Leys argues that too emphatic a turn to affect runs the risk of prioritising what we feel over 'what we believe or intend or mean' (465) when we interact with other people.

Although Leys certainly has a point in worrying about the consequences of an uncritical preference of affect for the importance and use of ideolo-

gy, the related issues of meaning, and especially intention, are not as self-evident as suggested in her article. In *Literary and Cultural Studies*, for instance, the shift away from approaches based on reader response criticism or authorial intent under the influence of deconstruction is a case in point. Intention is notoriously difficult, if not impossible to uncover; meaning depends on perspective and is different for every individual. I want to emphasise that my use of meaning and signification in this article should always be read as a reference to how meaning is constructed, or, in specific cases, as 'one of many possible meanings'.

Massumi, too, does not simply dismiss the issue of signification and intent, as Leys suggests he does. In his description of the plane of the virtual mentioned above, for instance, a notion of the 'will' curiously re-emerges in the landscape of affect - a landscape determined in the rest of 'The Autonomy of the Virtual' by anything but the wilful actions of an agential subject. No wonder, then, that the selection of one particular affect out of many which will render it intelligible in the socio-linguistic realm is referred to in both a passive construction ('an action will emerge') and in the most general terms possible when referring to a person: 'one "wills" it to emerge' (1995: 91). What seems to be at stake here for Massumi, then, is to avoid the reconstitution of the traditional subject in this selection process. But how can the relation between affect and signification be analysed without resorting to the idea that meaning and intention exist within a subject that 'wills' them into being? One possible answer is to interpret the socio-linguistic realm that Massumi refers to as 'discursive', rather than as controlled by specific subjects with specific intentions, as Leys seems to do. From this angle, Massumi's description of affect becoming emotion is rather similar to how Foucault has described the workings of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. As certain emotions can exist only through the exclusion of other affects, so discourse exists by the grace of the exclusion of possible alternatives to its own generated notions of what is true, sayable, and even reasonable (1972: 66-67).

In order to think through this relation between affect, signification and discourse, I will resort to the work of Sara Ahmed, who has attempted to theorize the social function of affect by placing it *in between* different subjects, signs, bodies, concepts and histories, rather than in the subject itself. In this interpretation, affect could thus be argued to form part of the dis-

ursive field amongst other elements. Indeed, according to Ahmed, affect sticks certain subjects or signs together by circulating 'between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement' (2004a: 119). A helpful analogy at this point is the one Ahmed draws with commodity fetishism. From this perspective, affect is no longer the drive to accumulate value, power or meaning, but is itself actually 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.' (2004a: 120). As a result, "feelings" become "fetishes", qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation' (2004b: 11). Ahmed calls this double effect the metonymic slide of affect as it functions to create relations of resemblance between figures, where there may have been none before. The slide creates the characteristics considered to belong inherently to any particular body, subject, object, sign or group and functions to cluster certain groups of subjects in opposition to others. At the same time, however, the sideways movement obscures the historical relations needed to understand the new connections, thus blocking an awareness of the fact that these relations are historically contingent, rather than causal.

With regard to Massumi's statement that affective experience itself may as of yet escape signification, Ahmed's perspective provides the possibility to think of affect and signification as processes that take place simultaneously and in the same dynamic. Although affect in itself apparently does not 'contain' meaning and is often interpreted as an amplification of other drives (Van Alphen 2008, Tomkins 1995), it is still situated and transmitted (Brennan 2004) between objects, ideas, signs and persons that are located within a signified and discursive field. These things and people make an impression on us accordingly. Although it may not be necessary to collapse the categories of affect and emotion for every situation, as Ahmed seems to do,<sup>1</sup> I do think it furthers an understanding of the changes ubuntu is currently undergoing to think of affect and signification as at least mutually constitutive, rather than as autonomous and separate realms of existence. By tracing a number of different usages of the concept of ubuntu from the nationalistic context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to its commercial use twenty years later, I

want to show how shifts in the signifier 'ubuntu' cause changes in the affective charge of it, and how shifts in the affects associated with ubuntu seem to influence the meaning of this word in a particular cultural and discursive field. With this, I do not intend an exhaustive Foucauldian genealogical project, in which I will uncover why and how certain interpretations of ubuntu got selected over others. Instead, I aim to show how the meaning of ubuntu transforms in particular settings and want to suggest that signification and affect are mutually constructive rather than mutually exclusive. Following Ahmed, I propose to think this relation in a way that takes the conditions of production and circulation that make meaning and affect possible into account.

## Ubuntu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

A suitable point of departure is one of ubuntu's most authoritative descriptions, namely that by Desmond Tutu, who chaired the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC was installed at the end of apartheid in order to address the country's divisive past and to prevent the violence and antagonism that dominated South African society at that moment from spiralling further out of control (Wilson 2001; Thompson 2000). In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, written by Tutu afterwards, the concept of ubuntu is presented as the most important reason why South Africa chose to address the past with a Truth Commission, rather than through legal procedures. In Tutu's book, we find a description of ubuntu that has become seminal: 'Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say (...) "Hey, he or she has ubuntu." This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. (...) It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "a person is a person because of other people." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share.'" (1999: 34-35). As becomes clear from the above Tutu pits ubuntu against a Cartesian logic in order to foreground ubuntu's connotations of community, sharing, and belonging. He also emphasises the importance of these notions

for becoming 'truly' human by embedding oneself in one's surroundings in a fashion that strives for social harmony. At the same time, however, this definition also immediately foregrounds an ambiguity in ubuntu with regard to social in/exclusion, in the sense that not belonging anywhere, or not wanting to belong, participate or share, can easily be considered deviant to the qualifications of the norm. What is considered to be communal and what is not, when one 'belongs' and when one does not, and, consequently, who sets the standard for when one's humanity is optimised, are central questions in ubuntu theory. These tensions reveal the constant need of negotiating ubuntu's benevolent, yet potentially asphyxiating drive towards harmony, and its function as a yardstick for communal, or in the case of the TRC, national belonging. Indeed, critics have objected to the explicit use of ubuntu in the TRC process because it reflects an exclusively Africanist focus on national reconciliation (see Wilson 2001).

This sense of national unity was partly the result of how people showing ubuntu in their dealings with others were discursively represented during the process. In one of the moments often quoted by scholars as a pivotal example of ubuntu, this discursive aspect of the meaning of ubuntu becomes particularly visible, because it was explicitly championed in the TRC report as an example of reconciliation and kindness (TRC Report vol. 5 1998: 366). The moment in question concerns a statement made by Cynthia Ngewu, who lost her son in what came to be known as the Guguletu Seven shooting in March 1986. In the shooting, which was the result of an ambush by the security police in Guguletu township near Cape Town, seven young men, allegedly members of the armed wing of the ANC, were killed. One of these men was Mrs. Ngewu's son, Christopher Piet. Here is what Mrs. Ngewu said after having met her son's killer, who requested a meeting with the family of his victims so that he could ask them for forgiveness:

'This thing called reconciliation... if I am understanding it correctly... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back... then I agree, then I support it all.' (Krog 2008: 356; Praeg 2008: 374-5, pauses in original).

Mrs. Ngewu's statement quite neatly evokes the logic of ubuntu as described by Tutu. She is showing an acute awareness of the fact that her own humanity, as well as its restoration, is deeply caught up with the actions of the policeman who killed her son. As a result, she reformulates their relation in a constructive way that seeks a harmonisation.

In her article on the role of forgiveness in the process of reconciliation, South African poet and critic Antjie Krog claims, like Tutu, that 'it is precisely this understanding and knowledge of inter-connectedness-towards-wholeness that underpinned most of the testimonies delivered before the TRC' (2008: 357).<sup>2</sup> Philosopher Leonhard Praeg argues, instead, that it is through 'equivocations' like Cynthia Ngewu's that 'reconciliation and forgiveness came to stand for an African appreciation of "our shared humanity" and to metonymically represent the meaning of ubuntu' (2008: 375). Praeg's use of metonymy is crucial here, because it designates the creation of an association between two things on the basis of contiguity, as was the case in Ahmed's use of it. The metonymic slide noted by Praeg from 'an African understanding of "our shared humanity"' to ubuntu causes an association between certain terms, ideas, signs or people that are presented in proximity to each other, and come to be seen, because of this proximity, as causally related. Read like this, and contrary to Krog's claim, ubuntu only partly underpins Mrs. Ngewu's statement; rather, the statement was constitutive of what ubuntu came to metonymically signify in the context of the TRC process, namely an affectively-charged process of reconciliation and forgiveness.

This process of reconciliation and forgiveness served a number of purposes in the discourse surrounding the TRC. First, as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was a psychologist working with victims and perpetrators in the TRC process, has explained: 'Reciprocating with empathy and forgiveness in the face of a perpetrator's remorse restores to many victims the sense that they are once again capable of effecting a profound difference in the moral community... Far from being an unnerving proposition and a burdensome moral sacrifice, then, compassion for many is deeply therapeutic and restorative.' (Gobodo-Madikizela 128-9). This psychological dynamic of forgiveness formed a crucial aspect in the discourse on national unity and reconciliation embodied by the TRC. As Gobodo-

Madikizela suggests, personal forgiveness is helpful for the individuals involved, partly because victims feel they contribute to a larger project of moral regeneration. It is exactly this linking of deeply affective individual and communal experiences of forgiveness to the nationalistic and moral context of the TRC discourse which has become metonymically associated with ubuntu, not least by the centrality granted to the concept by Desmond Tutu at this point in South African history.

The turn of phrase used by Mrs. Ngewu, however, is also crucial in this metonymic shift, which is represented by the repetition of the word 'if' in her definition of reconciliation. 'If' can suggest uncertainty, of course, but can also signal conditionality. Mrs. Ngewu supports reconciliation if, and only if, it means that humanity will be restored to herself, to the perpetrator, as well as to 'all of us'. The fact that she is cautious about her phrasing ('if I am understanding it correctly') underlines her awareness of the discursive responsibility she is taking towards her son, herself, her son's murderer, as well as to a broader community. In doing so, Mrs. Ngewu expresses the insight that her personal interests are deeply entwined with those of others, and do not exist in a vacuum. In order to get this message across, however, the uncertain connotations of the word 'if' - concerning the suitability of the TRC discourse to represent her individual case, for instance - are pushed to the background. The metonymic shift towards ubuntu makes certain aspects of her statement visible, but at the same time excludes others. As Praeg persuasively argues, the very workings of ubuntu as displayed by Mrs. Ngewu are a signal of 'the irretrievable loss of what we had to forget or allow to slip away unarticulated in order for there to be a shared discourse on reconciliation, forgiveness and, the sign that unifies it all, "ubuntu"' (Praeg 2008: 375). Like in Ahmed's description of the 'metonymic slide' of affect, then, the shift to ubuntu creates a new meaning for ubuntu on the axis of nationalism, and simultaneously makes statements about Mrs. Ngewu's grief and mourning that counter the TRC discourse invisible.

The fact that Mrs. Ngewu's statement was quoted in the TRC's final report as exemplary behaviour, further underlines ubuntu's association not only with sharing and hospitality in general but also with a specific moral responsibility to work through one's personal feelings in the context of

the TRC in the interest of national unity. This suggests that, in the TRC process, ubuntu came to be determined by the following sequence of associations: to be ubuntu is to realize that one's humanity is enfolded with the humanity of others; is to forgive; is to participate in reconciliation; is to be morally responsible; is to adhere to nation-building; is to be good. In this way, the relational meaning of ubuntu comes to be associated, by proxy and, as Praeg suggests, by discursive performativity, with the category of 'the good, of doing the right thing'. I argue that it is the positive sensation of being morally responsible, of aligning one's interests with the common good that forms the affective charge of the signifier 'ubuntu' in the TRC discourse.

## Shifting Signifiers: National Unity Revisited

The second use of ubuntu that I would like to discuss, dates from more than twenty years later. It shows an organization of affect and signification that differs from the way ubuntu came to the fore in the TRC context, although the new organization also implicitly refers to this previous use. This particular object mocks the moral significance of ubuntu in order to shift the sentiment previously associated with ubuntu to a new signifier. I will argue that this sideways movement partly obliterates and distorts the earlier meanings of ubuntu as well as the conditions under which the new meaning is created.

The object in question is a commercial aired in South Africa in 2009, when South Africa organised the Confederations Cup in order to prepare 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. 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 divas against taxi drivers, in another car guards

take on a group of boytjies, and in the last one the mamas take on the café owners. I will focus on the commercial that pits the mamas against the café owners.

At first sight, the commercial seems to be rather harmless, resembling a remake of Monty Python's soccer game between German and Greek philosophers more than anything else. However, the mamas' main plan of attack, explicitly called 'the ubuntu strategy' by the commentator, triggers an interpretation of ubuntu that leans on issues of race, class and gender in a problematic fashion. The 'ubuntu strategy' consists of a circle formed by the mamas that tries to manoeuvre the ball towards the opponents' goal (fig. 1). 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 - a form of exclusion that echoes ubuntu's potential for exclusion signalled in Tutu's description of the term. 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 for one of the mamas by the referee (fig. 2). 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. 3).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

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 that is familiar from the TRC context (fig. 4). 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. This spirit of camaraderie is further projected into the future by the word 'beyond', thus presenting the World Cup as a catalyst for national cohesion that does not yet exist, but is intended to last long after the catalysing spark has expired. This 'feel-good' sentiment is subsequently extended to the two brands depicted in the final frame: FIFA and BP (fig. 5). The two final frames of the commercial thus reveal an overt linking of the

fate of South Africa as a nation to the implicit interests of two multinational enterprises. In other words, South African national unity is made to serve the commercial interest of sponsorship.

This link between sponsorship and nationalism is, of course, not new, especially not in the context of sports. 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' (2001: 176). Indeed, 'the flagships of the global sporting economy,' like the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup, entail 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 (2001: 176). However, no matter how heavily sponsored an event is or how dominant the '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 2001: 176, 2). 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' (2005: 7). From this perspective, the most effective way to sell one's brand would be to put it on merchandise that displays 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 several 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 a second chance to achieve its long-awaited national unity through the common effort of making the World Cup a success.

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 is losing 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 BP. In fact, 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 popcorn stand, were denied sales contracts. So-called 'unofficial' retailers were not even 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'). Yet, they are the stars of the match in the commercial.

This economic reality, which intersects with a racial divide, underlines the irony of the 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 are considered to be notoriously racist. The depicted ubuntu strategy, then, is specifically aimed at excluding a group of people who are generally not considered to be 'real' South Africans and subtly reiterates the exclusionary and xenophobic claim that foreigners are stealing business opportunities from 'real' South Africans. This constitutes a repeat of the problematic potential in ubuntu of delineating 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. By staging this situation as a joke, however, the social inequities that lie at the basis of the national and commercial construct of nation-building are obscured.

In the commercial, ubuntu is thus 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 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 and damages its critical potential. This use is also familiar from the TRC context described in the previous section, where, although efforts were made to broaden the scope of ubuntu, the people promoted actively by the Commission's final report as most exemplary were often black African women (see Stuit 2013 and Driver 2005).

So even though national cohesion is still promoted in this commercial, it seems to have shifted signifiers. Whereas it was formerly attached to the signifier ubuntu in the politically-charged period of reconciliation shortly after the end of apartheid, the ridicule and the subsequent change of meaning of ubuntu in the commercial shifts attention from the first nation-building project to the second. The joke about ubuntu empties the signifier of its hefty moral load, which, under the guise of laughter, re-enters via the backdoor in the final shots of the commercial. There, it is attached to the new signifier: the commercially-driven organisation of the World Cup.

This humorous presentation of ubuntu is communicated through a tongue-in-cheek reinforcement of stereotypes (in terms of class, gender and race) imposed on certain people in South African society. As Mireille Rosello has pointed out in *Declining the Stereotype*, the problem with stereotypes is that they are extremely difficult to eradicate. They can travel around between different social contexts, disciplines, and texts without deteriorating much (Rosello 1998: 35). Although the reason for this resilience is perhaps - like the effect signification has on individual affective experience - impossible to uncover completely, Rosello suggests that it has something to do with the stereotypes' ability to bind people together: '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.' (1998: 11). The use of ubuntu in the commercial, therefore, besides posit-

ing 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. Following Rosello's description of the stereotype, it then becomes possible to argue that the joke about what is in fact an offensive stereotype of black women, Greek café owners, and the moral significance of ubuntu, potentially interpellates viewers who find this funny as caring and happy citizens, who are encouraged to bond over a carefree experience of the World Cup. In the creation of this imagined national community, viewers are, to speak with Ahmed, simultaneously encouraged to gloss over the conditions under which the grouping is effected: the racial, gender and economic inequalities that make the tournament possible are displaced.

Indeed, the readings of ubuntu in the TRC context and the BP commercial offered here, and which were based on Ahmed's idea of affect working metonymically and economically rather than residing in a single subject, both suggest that the circulation of affect can form a strategic tool for glueing people together in clusters that serve very specific goals. By recognizing the mechanics of these seemingly natural relations as the constructed effects of particular discursive representations and affective connotations, it becomes possible to put a spoke in the wheel of their potentially divisive effects. By this I do not mean to suggest that affects are necessarily ideologically undesirable, but to emphasise how important it is to realize how people, objects, theories and texts are stuck together in certain formations to achieve certain ends. While looking for ways to deal with the strategies of power that are prevalent in everyday life, it is also useful to keep in mind that the 'stickiness' of affect, as formulated by Ahmed, is not limited to 'big' affectations, like love, hate and fear. As the shift in ubuntu makes clear, what appears at first sight as a harmless and merely funny series of commercials, in fact reveals a great deal about how relations between, for instance, stereotypes, commerce and nationhood can be organized to exclude certain groups socially. The analysis of 'small' affectations like the use of humour in the BP commercial, helps to see which connections - whether between people, groups, objects, signs or texts - are sacrificed in favour of new ones. By paying attention to the movements of ubuntu, it becomes clear that certain meanings come into

existence by displacing others and that the interaction between affect and signification in this process cannot be disregarded if the goal is to keep the conditions under which any type of meaning is created, reiterated and transported, visible.

## Conclusion

As became clear from the above, the BP commercial performs a metonymic shift in the meaning and function of ubuntu. In this shift, the associative and affectively-charged sequence starts out with the moral and nationalistic significance of ubuntu in the TRC period - a significance which was itself a result of people working through their traumas on an individual and a communal level. Due to the fact that the TRC report picked up on the part of Mrs. Ngewu's response that proved commensurable with its own discourse on reconciliation and forgiveness, possible alternative responses to her plight have been obscured and never made it into the TRC's rendition of events, nor into what ubuntu came to mean in this period in South African history. This naturally presented link from individual to communal affect in the TRC discourse, can be, and has been, regarded as problematic. However, regardless of how one may value this particular interrelation of discourse and affect in the TRC process, it is also clear that ubuntu has played an important role in facilitating dialogue about South Africa's apartheid past.

Twenty years later, ubuntu is staged as slightly ridiculous and of little relevance to people in South Africa; in the BP commercial, it is restricted to a stereotyped trait of a particular group of (South) African women. The new meaning of ubuntu relies on this act of dismissal: by pushing aside ubuntu's prior meanings, attention is diverted from the term's potential relevance and room is created for introducing a new signifier for the mechanism of national unity. The commercial's staging of people uniting in soccer despite their differences flows into the suggestion that the World Cup is an effective way of striving for national unity that is economically organised. South Africans are not just united over their excitement about the tournament, they are also united in their efforts to make money out

of it. As became clear from the analysis given above, however, these economic conditions are radically different across various social strata, and the disjunctive sequence is set up, amplified, and made coherent by the positive sensation of having enjoyed the commercial. The result is that a seemingly natural relation between the different aspects is made possible and the processes of stereotyping, sponsorship, commercialism and economic differences that underpin it are subsequently obscured.

By making this shift in the uses of ubuntu visible, I have tried to argue for an analysis of ubuntu that does not take its 'intuitive nature' for granted. Instead, I have tried to look at how the meaning of ubuntu heavily relies on affective connotations. At the same time, these connotations are also made possible by the discursively-produced meaning of ubuntu in the settings discussed here. My goal in doing so has been twofold. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that the meaning of ubuntu will change according to the different contexts the word encounters. Looking closely at these different uses and how they depend on an interaction of the affective and the discursive, will, I hope, keep ubuntu available as a productive tool for thinking through intersubjective and communal relations without having to rely on an uncritical rendition of ubuntu as morally good or universally desirable. Instead, paying attention to how ubuntu circulates in particular cultural settings helps to keep its mechanics of production visible and available for constructive critique.

On the other hand, I have also wanted to suggest that ubuntu offers a crucial possibility to think through the relation between signification and affect in more general terms. As the particular analyses in this article suggest, to think of ubuntu with the radical split between affect and discourse in place only reveals a part of how the concept has functioned in the uses described here. To analyse ubuntu in the setting of the TRC, for instance, as a political discourse that was implemented from a governmental level without paying due to the affective connotations the term came to carry in this process of forgiveness and reconciliation, means to ignore its crucial function as a lubricant in bringing together radically disparate social groups. Although it is probably true that ubuntu would not have been able to function accordingly if the concept had not been 'pushed' politically, paying attention to ubuntu's affective connotations also makes clear

that the term's relative success could not have taken place if individuals like Cynthia Ngewu had not felt affected by the social momentum ubuntu came to represent.

Thus, what ubuntu eventually came to signify in the transition period in South Africa can only be made visible by acknowledging that affect and processes of signification take place in a mutually-constitutive dynamic. This, in turn, suggests that Massumi's idea of the plane of the virtual as a realm of experience that is autonomous from signification does not hold in the case of ubuntu. It suggests, at the very least, that the moment of transition from affect to meaning is not a one-way street. By referring to Ahmed's notion of affect as an accumulation taking place in-between different concepts, meanings, bodies and subjects, I have furthermore tried to suggest that it is exactly the critique of how affect comes to signification in particular uses of ubuntu - a critique foreclosed by Massumi's approach - that allows for a glimpse of the relations, histories and material conditions swept under the rug by the shifts in meaning performed in the interaction between affect and discourse.

Hanneke Stuit is assistant-professor at the Literary Studies department and affiliated with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, both at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests revolve around issues of cultural representation (both visual and textual), discourse, ethics, and community formation. Her dissertation (defended February 1, 2013) deals with the Southern African concept of ubuntu and the ways in which it relates to other (predominantly Western) concepts of communality and intersubjective relations. In this context, she analyses the interaction between ubuntu as a concept and cultural expressions, like novels, poetry and photography. She has also written on the representation of ubuntu in the process of truth and reconciliation initiated after the end of apartheid.

## References

- '2010 FIFA World Cup FNB TV Commercial.' Online video. 8 Feb. 2007. YouTube. 4 July 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjPazSFQrWA>.
- Ahmed, S. (2004a) 'Affective Economies.' In: *Social Text* 79, 22.1: 117-139.
- Ahmed, S. (2004b) *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Alphen, Van E. (2008) 'Affective operations in art and literature.' In: *Res* 53/54: 20-30.
- Bairner, A. (2001) *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Brennan, T. (2004) *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.
- Driver, D. (2005) 'Truth, Reconciliation, Gender: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Black Women's Intellectual History.' In: *Australian Feminist Studies* 20.47: 219-229.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2004) *A Human Being Died That Night*. Claremont: David Philip.
- Hobsbawm, E. and T. Ranger. (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Krog, A. (2008) 'This Thing Called Reconciliation... Forgiveness as Part of an Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness.' In: *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27.4: 353-366.
- Massumi, B. (1995) 'The Autonomy of Affect.' In: *Cultural Critique* 31: 83-109.
- Mnyaka, Mluleki, and Mokgethi Motlhabi. (2005) 'The African Concept of Ubuntu/Botho and its Socio-Moral Significance.' In: *Black Theology: An International Journal* 3.2: 215-237.
- Praeg, L. (2008) 'An Answer to the Question: What is [ubuntu]?' In: *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 27.4: 367-385.
- Rosello, M. (1998) *Declining the Stereotype. Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*. Hannover/London: Dartmouth/UP of New England.
- Silk, M.L., D.L. Andrews and C.L. Cole. (2005) 'Corporate Nationalism(s)? The Spatial Dimension of Sporting Capital.' In: M.L. Silk, D.L. Andrews and C.L. Cole (eds). *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*. Oxford / New York: 1-12.
- Stuit, H. (2013) *Ubuntu Strategies in Contemporary South African Culture*. Dissertation. University of Amsterdam.
- Thompson, L. (2001) *A History of South Africa*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Tomkins, S. (1995) 'What are Affects?' In: E.K. Sedgwick and A. Frank (eds.). *Shame and its Sisters: A Sylvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham: Duke UP: 33-74.
- 'Trademark 2010. Westerse idealen in Zuid-Afrika.' *Tegenlicht*. 16 Nov. 2009. Web. 9 Jan. 2012. <http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/afleveringen/2009-2010/heilige-huisjes/trade-mark-2010.html>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*. Vol 5. 1998. Web 5 July 2012. <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm>.
- Tutu, Desmond. (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London/Sydney/Auckland/Johannesburg: Rider, 2000.

Wilson, R.A. (2001) *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. Legitimizing the post-Apartheid state*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ahmed does not make a distinction between affect, feeling and emotions in both *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, and 'Affective Economies.' Instead she relies on the word 'impression' in her discussion of the subject because 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' (2004b: 6).

<sup>2</sup> 'Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness' is a term used by Krog to explain how ubuntu works.