African Modes of Writing and Being

We will not say of many books of philosophy that they are false, for that is to say nothing, but rather that they lack importance or interest, precisely because they do not create any concept or contribute an image of thought or beget a persona worth the effort.

— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

This chapter investigates the conditions under which different ways of talking about Ubuntu become possible. It considers some of the prominent modes of thinking through which the recovery of Ubuntu is conventionally understood and narrated. The idea of ‘modes of thinking’ is not unrelated to what Achille Mbembe (2002) has referred to as the different grand-narrative positions historically assumed to interpret Africa’s history and give meaning to being Africa(n) in relation to the rest of the world.

In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), Hayden White demonstrates how every historical account presents a mode of thinking that we can describe in terms of its narrative form. The politics of a historian shape the kind of history he or she is likely to present and this political stance or mode is the result of decisions (not necessarily conscious) made at two levels: chronicle and narrative structure. All historians have to make decisions about what facts to include from what is effectively a limitless chronicle of possibly relevant facts. A full account of anything is impossible and the choices made in order to construct a historical account are shaded by political empathies, understandings and imperatives. Less obviously, the way in which selected facts are then strung together is always structured by narrative assumptions implicit in the author’s political stance. For instance, a historical account of the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism may include rebellions against British colonial rule in the Cape colony as relevant facts in a chronicle of events narrated as an epic (because Promethean) ‘opening up of the dark continent’. But such a history may be contested
by an alternative account that either dismisses and excludes the same originary events as ‘mere criminal unrest’ or relegates them to footnotes of little consequence, then proceeding to narrate the ‘same’ history as a *tragic* story of colonial domination. In other words, history writing is determined as much by what we choose to include as it is by the narrative structure used to convey the meaning of what we include.

Given that Ubuntu is a historical phenomenon and that any attempt to articulate its meaning will be based on certain presuppositions regarding what it means to tell the history of anything, it should come as no surprise that attempts to articulate its meaning can be usefully conceptualised in terms of the political modes or stances presupposed by them. This chapter proceeds by way of what Lewis Gordon calls a ‘meta-critique of reason’ (2007: 123); that is, by thinking about our thinking about Ubuntu in a way that will make visible the various political modes or stances presupposed by our thinking. That Ubuntu discourse can be subjected to such an analysis of its various implicit political stances is a direct consequence or implication of the *archè* distinction of this report – between ubuntu and Ubuntu.

In the previous chapter, I argued that ubuntu refers to the praxis of a political economy of obligation, while Ubuntu refers to the abstraction of a certain dimension of that praxis and its representation in abstract, decontextualised form. I also delimited in the most cursory manner what I think of as the historical conditions for the possibility of this transition from ubuntu to Ubuntu. These were presented as histori a prioris and they illuminate the historical processes that have culminated in the transformation of the ‘we’ in the dictum ‘I am because we are’ from referring to real, kinship-based communities to its aspirational application to much larger, imagined communities – the township community, the anti-apartheid struggle community and, post-1994, the nation as imagined community. In the process, the logic of interdependence was abstracted from its historical political economy of obligation (in which proper, ritualised participation was a condition for ‘having ubuntu’) to become an abstract idea applicable to imagined communities, which by definition could no longer provide any similar ontological grounding or justification for what proper participation in their communal structures meant.

I also argued that Ubuntu is reconstituted through this process as a glocal phenomenon, the meaning of which becomes an indeterminate fusion of memories of the endogenous praxis of ubuntu and of the exogenous globalising discourses that can be said to resonate with the affect of these memories. Depending on the context in which this fused understanding of Ubuntu is invoked, we can distinguish between those glocalised fusions that are predominantly religious (drawing on
Christian notions of reconciliation, forgiveness and so on), those that are more philosophical (drawing on humanism, virtue ethics, communitarianism and the like) and those that are ideological (drawing on the economy of obligation as quintessentially a socialist practice or paradigm of human rights). Cultural nationalists are likely to resist this interpretation of Ubuntu as a glocal phenomenon and there is little I can do to assuage their melancholy other than to reiterate that to call something a glocal phenomenon does not amount to suggesting that the local plays no part in its construction, or that the plurivocity of its articulation means Ubuntu has no voice or meaning, or that the whole notion is vacuous and not deserving of our attention. Quite the contrary, all these suspicions and reactions already represent what this chapter seeks to surface, namely some of the political stances we implicitly assume when we address the question of the meaning, uniqueness and place of Ubuntu or respond to those who make such claims.

The way in which I want to surface these political stances is through the notion of a conceptual persona, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (1994). These personae will reveal a variety of different modes of the political at work when scholars connect ideas about knowing and writing about Africa (the epistemological) with modes of being postcolonial African (the ontological). As a useful first step in the direction of such an analysis, I want to start with what Mbembe has controversially called ‘African modes of self-writing’ (2002).

**African modes of self-writing**

For Mbembe (2002: 240–2) the most significant obstacle to writing the African self meaningfully into the present with reference to the past and the future, has been historicism (see also Benégas 2006). Isaiah Berlin provides a useful analysis of historicism in his well-known essay ‘Historical Inevitability’ (1969), but Hannah Arendt has probably offered us the most devastating description of historicism as a form of explanation that effectively hypostasizes the explanatory concept of ‘law’ into a world-negating and self-abolishing reality. In her essay ‘On the Nature of Totalitarianism’, she writes:

In the totalitarian interpretation, all laws become, instead, laws of movement. Nature and History are no longer stabilizing sources of authority for laws governing the actions of mortal men, but are themselves movements. Their laws, therefore, though one might need intelligence to
perceive or understand them, have nothing to do with reason or permanence. At the base of the Nazis’ belief in race laws lies Darwin’s idea of man as a more or less accidental product of natural development – a development which does not necessarily stop with the species of human beings such as we know it. At the base of the Bolsheviks’ belief in class lies the Marxian notion of men as the product of a gigantic historical process racing towards the end of historical time – that is, a process that tends to abolish itself. The very term ‘law’ has changed in meaning; from denoting the framework of stability within which human actions were supposed to, and were permitted to, take place, it has become the very expression of these motions themselves (1994: 340–1).

Mbembe (2002) argues that two forms of historicism have led postcolonial African theorists into a conceptual (epistemological) and, if we take these things as seriously as we should, existential (ontological) dead end. Like all forms of historicism, they too present teleological accounts of what it means to think postcolonial Africa. The first of these, the Afro-radical narrative, uses a combination of Marxist and nationalist categories to construct an eschatological narrative of hope and redemption, in which the rhetoric of autonomy, resistance and emancipation functions as a conceptual filter for determining not only what may legitimately be said about Africa, but also what counts as useful knowledge about Africa. It typically offers an account of history that starts with colonialist oppression and leads through resistance to emancipation conceived, materially, in terms of the seizure of the state apparatus and, in idealist terms, as the recovery and re-establishment of an autonomous African self. The second form of historicism offers a nativist grand narrative that promises the articulation of an authentic definition of African identity on the basis of membership of the black race. In this division between the historical grand narrative concerned with material freedom and the existential narrative concerned with identity, we see a further reflection of the division discussed in the previous chapter between the historical and poetistic traditions of anti-colonial resistance.

Both teleological and nativist narratives depart from the experiences of existential alienation (loss of self), material exploitation (loss of resources) and psychological humiliation (loss of dignity) which, when combined, act as ‘a unifying center of Africans’ desire to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty), and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy)’ (Mbembe
For Mbembe, the manner in which both narratives account for the unity of these experiences is hugely problematic because they do so in a manner that is essentially historicist – an accusation that will make more sense once we make explicit their various teleological assumptions.

First, these grand narratives reduce all knowledge and science, often retrospectively, to mere instruments in the struggle for liberation, which is assumed to have intrinsic moral significance; second, Africa’s dilemma is attributed to the same set of mythical forces that return again and again to subjugate and destroy the continent, its people and their traditions, always preventing ‘the blooming of African uniqueness’ (Mbembe 2002: 243). Mbembe refers to this as a historiography of sorcery, in which unknown and impenetrable forces constantly manipulate the continent. This historiography ascribes ‘the ultimate responsibility for what happens to the acts or behaviour of impersonal or “trans-personal” or “super-personal” entities or “forces” whose evolution is identified with human history’. Crucial for Mbembe about such an ‘impersonal interpretation of historical change’ (Berlin 1969: 45) is exactly this question of responsibility, for it makes it almost impossible to raise the question of precolonial disunity and fratricide that would otherwise account for Africa’s own complicity in catastrophes such the transatlantic slave trade. The third problematic aspect of the Afro-radical grand narrative particularly is that it threatens to destroy tradition in the mistaken belief that only the class struggle, with the proletariat as the universal agent of all plausible action, matters. In the fourth and last instance, this victimology is countered by an exaggerated belief in the possibility of achieving independence, of which the clearest sign is the mythical notion of decolonisation and/or the promise of a final liberation from. If the West historically and consistently misrepresented Africans and exploited them on the basis of these misrepresentations then, so it is argued, it is necessary and indeed possible to liberate Africa(ns) once and for all from these ‘repressentations’ (Praeg 2000: 264) in order for Africa to find a voice through which to ‘narrate its own fables’ (Mbembe 2002: 244) authentically and to establish intellectual autonomy and political sovereignty.

But here is the dead end reproduced by this grand narrative of tragic optimism, victimhood and autonomy: the idea of freedom, what it is and what it will look like when it is achieved, is conceived in the very terms of the oppression; that is, in terms of a racist, Western modernity. Differences between African people and peoples are glossed over in order to construct an African subject that coincides with a certain geography (on the borders of which Egypt consistently remains
undecidable), on the basis of which the racialised native is created, who can then speak in his/her ‘own voice’. In this conception of freedom, Africans have bought into and replicated a way of thinking about the difference between Africa and the West premised on exactly the same logic the West used to colonise the continent. By this I assume Mbembe to mean something like the following: African anti-colonial resistance accepted as axiomatic the Western notions that the difference between Africa and the West is so fundamental as to be ontological, that this difference can be accurately symbolised in racial terms, that this racialised difference, when explored, could produce knowledge of what is uniquely African and that Africans will only be free once they have employed the instruments of power to create the spaces in which to articulate and give real effect to their uniqueness or authentic way of being. This is essentially the Enlightenment project of autonomy and freedom turned on its head, except that here ‘the neurosis of victimisation fosters a mode of thought that is at once xenophobic, racist, negative, and circular’ (Mbembe 2002: 252).

The circularity hinted at by Mbembe becomes particularly evident in Ubuntu discourse where it manifests as a definitional circularity. The conventional or mainstream articulation of the meaning of Ubuntu often, but not necessarily, combines elements of the Afro-radical and nativist assumptions in order to posit Ubuntu as a lost African way of being that, once recovered, promises a reimagining of the founding of the postcolonial state on an authentically African understanding of being and belonging (autochthony/being from here) – of which Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa project (discussed in the following chapter on African Socialism) has probably been the clearest and most tragic example. In this view, liberation or decolonisation appears as the final moment of institutionalised self-recognition and self-becoming, of instituting what it means to re-member what had been dis-membered by colonialism. Often in Ubuntu discourse, however, this act of re-membering is but a prelude to a further act of reversal that sees Africa offering its unique insight into the inseparableness of being and belonging as gift to the rest of the world, in order to save it from its morbid fascination with destructive individualism. The hope of decolonisation, of finally and absolutely liberating oneself from oppression – this ‘mad dream of a world without Others’ (Mbembe 2002: 252) – will only come to pass when Africa has succeeded, finally, in saving the erstwhile oppressor from himself (see also Marx 2002: 65). But this whole train of thought is premised on a definitional circularity that, in its crudest form, unfolds in three steps: First, an image of the West is constructed, from which is excluded
all Western philosophies, traditions of thought and political praxes premised on a recognition of and commitment to our interdependence; that is, various Western forms of humanisms, socialisms, communitarianisms, phenomenologies and so on. Only through such an expulsion or ban can the ‘West’ be wholly conflated with ‘individualism’. Second, this allows for a coterminus image of Africa to emerge as essentially the opposite; that is, a place and a people that recognise our profound interdependence. This structural interplay between the ban and the self-nomination as communal is the condition for talk about Ubuntu as a gift to become possible because Ubuntu can only be gifted to the rest of the world on the assumption that there is a need ‘over there’ for what we alone have ‘over here’. But, and this is the crucial third point, when asked, ‘But what is Ubuntu? What is this gift?’ theorists who write in this mode can only explain what Ubuntu is with reference to, and in most cases by equating it with, one of the Western philosophies of interdependence initially banned from the construction of the image of the West – Ubuntu as African humanism, African Socialism, African communitarianism, etc. At the risk of labouring the point, we can say that it is assumed that the space in which to exist authentically ‘over here’ can only be created by forcefully removing from ‘over there’ all signs that trouble the desired distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’. After the clearing that made the ‘here’ visible, however, we can only interpret or give substance to what ‘being from here’ means with reference to the very signs that were cleared from ‘over there’ in order to make visible the difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’.

The locus classicus of this definitional circularity and its attendant violence are those discursively dominant explanations of Ubuntu that depart from a juxtapositioning of what is taken to be its central tenet (‘I am because we are’) with the putative poverty of the Cartesian ‘I think therefore I am’ – as if subsequent to this ‘Idiotic’ utterance (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), the Western conception of the self had not turned some fundamentally communitarian corners (as I argue with reference to Hegel in Chapter 4). The violence through which a difference between ‘over here’ and ‘over there’ is made consists in using a contemporary reinvention of traditional ethics to deliver a critique of a Western conception of subjectivity, for which a historical statement of modernity is taken as synecdoche. The reason for this has to do with more than sheer intellectual laziness. If pre- and

1. This notion from Deleuze and Guattari is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
post-Cartesian Western traditions of communitarian thought were not from the outset expelled in order to invent a salvific role for Ubuntu, the whole Ubuntu discourse would face a dangerous apocalypse – which in its original Greek sense refers to an unveiling or a making visible (Bailie 1995: 15). What would become visible in this instance is not only the politics of sovereignty (‘we have Ubuntu’), not only the violence necessary to sustain this sovereignty in its mode as identity claim (‘unlike you’), but also the profound lack of shared humanity or Ubuntu that such a politics of sovereignty implies.

To proceed differently, without these easy and self-legitimating – although given the history of the continent, entirely understandable – attempts at repositioning the meaning of being African, requires a much more sophisticated account of Ubuntu’s raison d’être, one that would have to depart from the difficult-to-hear recognition of Ubuntu as a glocal phenomenon that relies on Western intellectual forms and ethical practices for significant dimensions of its own articulation.

Much of this already relates to the nativist grand narrative, in which the ‘defence of the humanity of Africans is almost always accompanied by the claim that their race, traditions, and customs have a specific character’ (Mbembe 2002: 254), but without fundamentally challenging the validity or justness of the categories (race, progress, etc.) necessarily invoked in order to demonstrate the claim. Just as in the case of the teleological Afro-radical narrative, where liberation from Western modernity is conceived in the terms of that modernity itself so, here, the claims to specificity and uniqueness hardly ever subject to scrutiny the principle category upon which this discourse was based, namely race.2 In other words, ‘whether we look at négritude or the different versions of Pan-Africanism, in these discourses the revolt is not against Africans’ belonging to a distinct race, but against the prejudice that assigns this race an inferior status’ (254). As Marx argues, ‘Pan Africanism fails to transcend the ideology it is reacting to, and remains captive within a simplistic discourse of race and colour’ (2002: 65). Mbembe further clarifies:

2. Much of the controversy generated by Mbembe’s analysis relates to the reductive violence of the text through which all African thought is collapsed into two grand-narrative modes. The way I appropriate his suggestion here is to consider these two modes along the line of what chaos theorists would call attractors or thoughtways, perhaps simply salient tendencies in the geography of postcolonial thought.
This urge to make Africa unique is presented as a moral and political problem, the reconquest of the power to narrate one's own story – and therefore identity – seeming to be necessarily constitutive of any subjectivity . . . It is this alterity that must be preserved at all costs . . . not as the symptom of a greater universality, but rather as the inspiration for determining principles and norms governing Africans’ lives in full autonomy and, if necessary, in opposition to the world (2002: 255).

The combination of historical racism and contemporary identity politics has backed Africa into a corner: the colonial denial of the humanity of Africans has prompted African theorists to counter with the universalist claim that ‘we are human beings like any others’ (a claim to *sameness*), but identity politics demands the contrary, namely the substantiation of a particularist claim to *difference*, to the effect that ‘we are not like everybody else’. The question then becomes: How to substantiate the former without forfeiting the identity claim embodied in the latter, or how to substantiate the latter in a way that will not amount to contradicting the former? The different ways in which African theorists have struggled to balance these two imperatives are complex and nuanced (Mbembe 2002: 255–6). In Ubuntu discourse, these twin ambitions are ‘characterised by a tension between a universalizing move that claims shared membership within the human condition (*sameness*) and an opposing, particularistic move. This latter move emphasizes difference and specificity by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (*tradition*) and the values of autochthony’ (252–3). The result, as demonstrated above, is the contradictory deployment of Ubuntu to achieve both ends: *qua* currency of cultural sovereignty Ubuntu is used to articulate *difference* but, deployed and exported as a critique of the limitations of sovereignty (retributive models of justice or Afro-chic versions of international relations), it seeks recognition for its insistence on our shared humanity or *sameness*.

This generates a tension I have described elsewhere (Praeg 2008a) as a representational undecidability or paradox of differentiation. The paradox emerges when Ubuntu *qua* philosophy of our *interdependence* (our shared humanity) is used for the political ends of demonstrating *independence* or cultural sovereignty. In other words, a cultural philosophy of *interdependence* is used to purchase the political ends of (cultural) *sovereignty*. In suspending the relationality that makes it necessary and possible to think Ubuntu, we contradict the very meaning of Ubuntu. Formulated differently, what we set out to do with the value system (to conduct a
form of identity politics) remains radically at odds with what is central to that value system itself. If there is a disappointment in Ubuntu discourse, it is the almost complete lack of critical awareness of how what Ubuntu is taken to mean remains fundamentally at odds with what we try to do with what it means.3

We can simplify this somewhat. In the introduction to African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics, Munyaradzi Felix Murove notes that ‘the African ethical tradition has been influenced by western philosophical, and Christian and Islamic, ethical traditions. This triad of influences has meant that African ethics discourse is sometimes overwhelmingly dialogical instead of purely assertive’ (2009c: xv, emphasis added). This diagnosis is perfectly correct and merely a different way of calling Ubuntu a glocal phenomenon. But Murove’s description is useful because the tension between the dialogical and the assertive reveals the complex meta-problematique regarding the politics of positioning an ethical system, such as Ubuntu (that is constitutively dialogical or interrelational), in a world where it needs to play a role that is not first and foremost dialogical but assertive; that is, where the politics of its insertion into the world requires an assertiveness that in turn presupposes a suspension of its dialogical or interrelational nature, in order for it to be branded and patented in terms of the logic of cultural and political sovereignty: as African, as being ‘from here’ and ‘not there’, a sign of the particular, of authentic African identity and so on.

In subsequent chapters I have more to say about this discourse on Ubuntu’s so-called exceptionalism and the various forms and mutations of racism at work in it. I argue that it may be useful to think of postcoloniality as a form of hypermodernity. What exactly this means is discussed at some length in the chapters that follow. Suffice it to say that all modernities are premised on a certain blindness regarding their founding logic, of what they include and exclude in order to execute the project of modernity. Making its blind spots visible will always threaten a project of modernity with collapse, failure or inexecution. The paradox of differentiation is the blind spot of South Africa’s hypermodernity. It is that which, although necessary, must remain invisible in order for the myth of cultural autonomy to

3. This may be familiar to complexity theorists as a paradox that comes into being when a value system, premised on the anteriority of relations to entities, needs to position itself in a world predominantly premised on the exact opposite belief, namely the anteriority of entities to relations. In terms of the line of argument pursued in the rest of this book, this paradox can also be appropriated as typical of the condition of hypermodernity.
contribute to the political work of executing political sovereignty. The profound contradiction involved in understanding the need for this paradox to remain invisible, thereby making it visible, directly relates to the condition of hyper-modernity.

Scholars who write on Ubuntu seem to negotiate this paradox in one of two ways – either by offering Ubuntu as sign of cultural sovereignty back to the world as a gift, in the spirit of the very shared humanity it violated in order to become the articulation of it; alternatively, by not committing the definitional circularity in the first instance and by recognising the similarity between Ubuntu and other humanisms or communitarianism (that is, by sacrificing the claim to radical particularity), but nonetheless insinuating or presupposing a meaningful difference, often masked as a claim to superiority over other forms of communitarianism. It seems therefore that both the teleological and nativist meta-narratives draw their fundamental categories from the myths they claim to oppose and reproduce their dichotomies: the racial difference between black and white; the cultural confrontation between civilized peoples and savages; the religious opposition between Christians and pagans; the very conviction that race exists and is at the foundation of morality and nationality (Mbembe 2002: 256).

Mbembe's analysis drew many responses at the time of its publication, some appreciative and, a great many, very critical. I want to focus on one critical response in particular because it compels us to return, yet again, to the dialectic of recognition discussed in the previous chapter. In so doing, I also point to the locus where Mbembe's text auto-deconstructs – a deconstruction that, although relevant to his overarching claim, does not impact directly on his insights regarding historicism in postcolonial criticism.

According to Arif Dirlik, in analysing these two grand narratives, Mbembe ‘focuses on their problematic assumptions, but largely bypasses questions of historicity – the circumstances, in other words, that rendered those assumptions plausible, and also made it possible to overlook their limitations’ (2002: 611, emphasis added). In other words, what Mbembe glosses over in his critique is that

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4. A number of these responses to Mbembe appeared in *Public Culture* 14(3), 2002.
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*At the time* of adopting certain nationalist (teleological) and/or nativist positions, the criticism that in doing so liberation fighters were simply replicating colonial categories of nation, class and race ‘would have been impossible to entertain . . . [because] a unified national entity [premised on the “myth” of race and Africanness] was the only conceivable agent capable of overthrowing colonialism and withstanding its ravages’ (613). This comment is valuable because it takes us to the heart of an issue regarding the political naivety of much Ubuntu discourse, namely that many texts read very much like outdated ethnophilosophy. How is it possible that after so many years the South African Ubuntu debate can in so many respects read like boring ethnophilosophy? How is it possible that, despite a whole reception history of critical engagement with ethnophilosophy in all its manifold manifestations, Tinyiko Maluleke can still write in 1994: ‘The Négritude school of thought remains popular and is restated in a variety of ways even in our times . . . Today we see a resurgence of négritude in the popularity of the concept Ubuntu’ (in Vervliet 2009: 29). There are no doubt many reasons for this – not least of which must be the intellectual isolation of South Africa from the rest of the continent during the formative years of what would emerge as the subdiscipline of African philosophy, which produced an undeniable degree of myopia among many South African intellectuals that still plays itself out in a kind of parochialism that refuses to read Ubuntu historically; that is, against the backdrop of a range of postcolonial attempts that have been made to translate African humanism into a viable postcolonial development ideology or emancipatory philosophy – a conversation in which Ubuntu discourse must be recognised as little more than an as yet underdeveloped and undertheorised latecomer. As Mamphela Ramphele put it in a slightly different context and with slightly different intent:

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5. This, of course, raises a complex question about the inescapability, or not, of the dialectic and the assertion that racism calls forth a performative counterclaim that can and must (so the dialectic goes) temporarily present as racism itself or, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s immortalised description of négritude as ‘anti-racist racism’. I cannot engage with the inescapability, or not, of the dialectic here. More relevant for our purposes is the fact that Dirlik’s criticism points to the locus of the text’s auto-deconstruction. What Mbembe’s text ultimately aims to demonstrate is what the epigraph attributed to Deleuze adroitly hints at, namely that ‘the only subjectivity is time’. As Dirlik’s criticism implies, by refusing to recognise or even engage with the performative necessity or dialectical inescapability of these two grand-narrative responses to colonialism, Mbembe denies the very historicity that is the subject (and, according to Deleuze, subjectivity) of his analysis.
Ubuntu as a philosophical approach to social relationships must stand alongside other approaches and be judged on the value it can add to better human relations in our complex society. The refusal to acknowledge the similarity between ubuntu and other humanistic philosophical approaches is in part a reflection of the parochialism of South Africans and a refusal to learn from others. We have to have the humility to acknowledge that we are not inventing unique problems in this country, nor are we likely to invent entirely new solutions (in Enslin and Horsthemke 2004: 548).

To proceed with working in and against the naive discourse on Ubuntu and in order to consider the implications of doing so in an ever-globalising world, I want to retain the essence of Mbembe’s critique, while at the same time expanding on it by bringing to the fore some of the political modes of being at work in the different ways the recovery of Ubuntu has been imagined and narrated. My suggestion is that the political stances of scholars working in this domain can usefully be made visible through what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) refer to as conceptual personae. It seems to me that there is a whole range of these personae at work in the Ubuntu discourse, each of which represents a particular conception of the possibilities and limitations of thinking Africa and how these embody specific ways of being.

The thinking self never remains uncontaminated or unaffected by the ideological position assumed. Ideological positions, such as that of the Saviour or Archivist, convey a specific way of thinking, through which the self imagines him- or herself to be in the world and what it means to live history in a particular way. It is on the basis of these conceptions of what kind of thinking we need and what kind of being is possible that we position ourselves, make claims and contest injustices. Perhaps one can say that these personae simplify by capturing what is meant by specific imaginaires; that is, ‘complex systems of presumption . . . that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally’ (Vogler 2002: 625). The discussion that follows of the conceptual personae at work in Ubuntu discourse does not pretend to be exhaustive. It may merely present the main characters. No doubt others may be waiting in the wings for their opportunity to make an appearance, to be heard and recognised as additional modes of being that capture something essential about the possibility of what it means to think, write and be African.
**African modes of being**

It is possible that the conceptual persona only rarely or allusively appears for himself. Nevertheless, he is there, and however nameless and subterranean, he must always be reconstituted by the reader.

— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

Implicit in each of the personae is a conception of what it means to think Africa — in this case, the possibilities and limitations of thinking what Ubuntu means — as well as a postulate relating to what it means to be assertive and sovereign in a world that is in some ways quite post-sovereign. These personae not only reveal different understandings of thinking and ways of being, but also, considered together, present us with something like a coherent field of inquiry. Within this unified field, each persona represents a specific political stance on questions such as: What can we know and what not? What is the status of knowledge about Africa and what kind of agency is possible and impossible in terms of any specific conception of thinking and being Africa(n)? These different conceptions of the political play out as differences regarding the possibility of past recovery and future autonomy (the Revolutionary); or a messianic anticipation that a fully recovered self can be offered to the world, either as a contribution to a ‘Civilisation of the Universal’ (as per Léopold Sédar Senghor) or as privileged, uncanny reminder of a shared humanity (the Saviour); alternatively, as the impossibility of knowing Africa, given its invention by the West, and therefore of being unable to act in the world with any certainty (the Archivist) or, alongside this persona, a fatalistic and often racist emphasis on the coercive subtext or ‘dark side’ of Ubuntu that, so the story goes, merely represents a more virulent form of the coercive tendency represented by any form of communitarianisms (the Conformist). Lastly, a politics in which the specificity of Africa (conceived as an autonomous subject with sovereign politics) is considered less important than the embrace of a sense of belonging, in which Ubuntu represents no more than a local name for a universal phenomenon (the Cosmopolitan). In addition to these perhaps somewhat obvious personae, there is an additional one that embodies the recognition of the aporetic nature of postcoloniality as hypermodernity. This mode is not unrelated to calls to consider authenticity no longer in terms of the autonomy of the subject, but as an ‘exploratory attitude’ (Diagne 2002: 622), driven by the appreciation of the performative dimension of political discourse. I return to the persona of the Text Worker or Construction Worker at the end of the last chapter of this book.
It must be said that the purpose of foregrounding these different modes or stance of thinking and being as personae is not to suggest a debilitating relativism, but rather an attempt to show how different avenues are determined and complete imaginaires constructed on the basis of assumptions regarding the world and what we can know about it, how this positions the living subject in the world in certain ways, not in the abstract, but in the very real sense of what such assumptions make possible or foreclose as impossible.

Of characters and personae
In *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre interrogates the failure of the Enlightenment to produce universal moral standards. He notes how the moral code of cultures is often best represented by a stock of characters specific to that culture:

In the case of a character role and personality fuse in a more specific way than in general; in the case of a character the possibilities of action are defined in a more limited way than in general. One of the key differences between cultures is in the extent to which roles are characters; but what is specific to each culture is in large and central part what is specific to its stock of characters. So the culture of Victorian England was partially defined by the characters of the Public School Headmaster, the Explorer and the Engineer; and that of Wilhelmine Germany was similarly defined by such characters as those of the Prussian Officer, the Professor and the Social Democrat (1982: 26–7).

Characters become the stock-in-trade of cultures precisely because they embody different dimensions of the moral aspirations encoded in that culture. MacIntyre continues:

Characters have one other notable dimension. They are, so to speak, the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world. Characters are the masks worn by moral philosophies. Such theories, such philosophies, do of course enter into social life in numerous ways: most obviously perhaps as explicit ideas in books or sermons or conversations, or as symbolic themes in paintings or plays or dreams. But the distinctive way in which they inform the lives
of characters can be illuminated by considering how characters merge what usually is thought to belong to the individual man or woman and what is usually thought to belong to social roles. Both individuals and roles can, and do, like characters, embody moral beliefs, doctrines and theories, but each does so in its own way (1982: 27).

Although there would be some similarity between morality encoded as characters and personae as the embodiment of a certain position assumed on the nature of and the relation between thinking and being, my immediate concern here is not with morality or virtue. Rather, the personae I am concerned with illuminate something of an assumed relationship between knowing the world (epistemology) and being in it (ontology). Because Deleuze and Guattari’s theorising on this matter is deeply embedded in a theory of the concept, this is where we have to start.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), every concept consists of components that, much like clustering atoms, group and overlap to form meaning, both within a concept (to give it substance) and in relation to other concepts, with which certain bridges or associations are formed. Concepts exist and function in what Deleuze and Guattari conceive of as the historical planes of philosophical thought. In many ways, their analysis reads like a complex physics of language, from which I want to extract just one idea, namely what they refer to in a very specific sense as the presuppositions of a concept. Presuppositions do not refer to the way one concept presupposes another (the concept of a rose presupposes the concept of flower). Rather, what Deleuze and Guattari mean is that every concept is premised, first, on a preconceptual ‘image of thought’ (61) that represents an implicit understanding of what it means to think and second, on a further supposition that relates this understanding of what thinking means to what it means to exist; that is, a mode of being. An example will clarify what they mean.

When Descartes stated, ‘I think therefore I am’, he articulated and thereby presented us with a very specific idea of what thinking means: it is an everyday activity, something we all do all the time, not something that needs to be explained to us, not anything particularly difficult: ‘Everyone can think; everyone wants the truth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 62). But in addition to this image of thought, there is something else at work in Descartes’s claim, an assumption of another kind, one that relates the image of thought to the way the thinking person is assumed to exist in the world, to a certain way of being. This can best be described as the concept’s persona. In Descartes’s case, the conceptual persona is that of the Idiot,
the private thinker; one who does not think or act with or alongside other people or a tradition as such:

The idiot is the private thinker, in contrast to the public teacher (the schoolman): the teacher refers constantly to taught concepts . . . whereas the private thinker forms a concept with innate forces that everyone possesses on their own account by right (‘I think’). Here is a very strange type of persona who wants to think, and who thinks for himself, by the ‘natural light’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 62).

At work in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis is perhaps something that a whole range of contemporary theorists from an array of interdisciplinary fields of study, such as postcolonial studies and complexity theory, have all come to agree on, namely that there is and perhaps never was a clear distinction between knowing the world (epistemology) and understanding or projecting how we exist in the world (ontology). For Lesley Kuhn (2007), this means recognising that epistemology and ontology are mutually constitutive – a claim supported by Gregory Bateson, for whom we live ‘bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which – regardless of ultimate truth or falsity – become partially self-validating’ (1972: 314).

Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of conceptual personae affords us not only a useful way of conceiving the unity of such nets of ‘epistemological and ontological premises’, but it also opens the door for describing as a political stance every combination of what thinking means and its assumed mode of being. In other words, how any author unifies epistemology and ontology can be decoded to represent a persona with a certain politics. This is not only a matter of epistemology and ontology being mutually constitutive. The way in which they constitute each other is political or is a useful way of describing what we mean by the concept of the political.

Once we have been alerted to conceptual personae, we find that the history of Western philosophy is replete with them – in fact, Deleuze and Guattari argue, ‘the history of philosophy must go through these personae, through their changes according to planes and through their variety according to concepts. Philosophy constantly brings conceptual personae to life; it gives life to them’ (1994: 62). One philosopher alone may generate a whole range of personae in the process of an evolving oeuvre. Friedrich Nietzsche is a very good example of this. His work presents us with different personae, including Dionysus and Zarathustra, Christ,
the Saviour, the Higher Men and even Socrates. In addition, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the range of personae can be divided into those that we instinctively warm to (sympathetic personae) and those that we find repulsive (antipathetic personae). Regardless of their mode, the function of all personae is to capture the dangers, perceptions, feelings and positive or negative moments that may be implicit in a specific philosophy or way of thinking (63).6

With this in mind, I want to proceed by advancing two ideas that seem relatively unproblematic to me. First, all talk about Ubuntu implies a stance on big questions such as: What can we know of (precolonial) Africa? What can we hope to achieve by re-membering this knowledge? What kind of freedom is possible on the basis of this knowledge? How do we go about re-membering modes of being and belonging in a way that both recognises the debt our thinking owes to the West and the urgency with which we need to think against Western dominance about what thinking means? Second, texts about Ubuntu represent a fascinating range of different nets of epistemological and ontological premises that can usefully be represented as conceptual personae. In mapping these, it is important to keep in mind that the personae seldom manifest as a univocal presence in any given text. In fact, only in extreme and rare cases do texts manifest one persona to the exclusion of all others. Rather, the text, like a conventional stage production, has a main persona and a support cast of lesser personae. Nonetheless, in every text, there is a main character or persona that captures something of an overriding and pervasive assumption about the relationship between thinking and being. The cast of personae I have assembled for the purpose of this report are the Prophet (with a subdivision into the Revolutionary and the Saviour), the Archivist, the Conformist, the Cosmopolitan and the Text Worker or Construction Worker.7

**The matrix of classification**

At its most fundamental level, the matrix – defined as the surrounding medium or structure – within which conceptual personae appear as political suppositions, can usefully be negotiated with the concept of agency. Personae distinguish themselves

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6. The relationship between personae and psychosocial types, although complex and important within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, is not immediately relevant here. On this point see their analysis (1994: 67–8).

7. In what follows, I am only concerned with a broad characterisation of each conceptual persona. In each case, I make reference only to a limited number of texts that best exemplify that persona.
from each other through the different answers they provide to two fundamental questions: How much freedom does the African subject have to give meaning to Ubuntu? And, what end will this meaning serve? – that is, what is Ubuntu and why bother with it?

The first question pivots on the extent to which the meaning of Ubuntu is seen either to derive from endogenous sources (the extent to which its content is considered, unproblematically, as African) or from exogenous influences (inextricably to some extent dependent on Western theories and ideologies for its articulation). As argued in the previous chapter, this difference can also be represented in terms of the opposition between the local and the global – a binary that I argued is not very useful because the meaning of Ubuntu is irreducible to this tension and is, as such, glocal. The difference remains useful in as much as it enables us to bring into focus the political suppositions of the various conceptual personae. In what follows, I discuss the personae that prioritise globalism; that is, the assumption that it is more or less impossible to speak meaningfully about Ubuntu as local, given either the generality or universality it represents or the historic discursive invention of Africa. I also consider the personae that emphasise the local nature and particularity of Ubuntu as a revolutionary force and an authentic ethic with emancipatory potential.

The global: Archivist and Cosmopolitan

Urban consumptivism and cosmopolitanism form the other side of historic trauma.

— Wim van Binsbergen, ‘Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society’

In ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’, having critiqued as historicist the Afro-radical and nativist grand narratives of liberation, Mbembe briefly discusses, if only to dismiss, two attempts that have been made to go beyond historicism and ‘to break with this empty dream, this exhausted mode of thought’ (2000: 257). The first came from V-Y Mudimbe, who in The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge, writes: ‘Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly “Afrocentric” descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order’ (1988: x). Mudimbe’s articulation of the implications of this was as
devastating then as it is now: ‘Is it possible to consider [a more authentic reflection of la chose du texte] outside of the very epistemological field which makes my question both possible and thinkable?’ (86). The suggestion is that our knowledge of Africa is so indebted to Western historical discourses on Africa that the theories and paradigms we use to think, write and talk about Africa derive from a Western archive and that every move we make in the direction of speaking about Africa implicitly or explicitly reiterates the same order. Comments Mbembe:

> From this point of view, Africa as such exists only on the basis of the text that constructs it as the Other’s fiction. This text is then accorded a structuring power, to the point that a self that claims to speak with its own, authentic voice always runs the risk of being condemned to express itself in a preestablished discourse that masks its own, censures it, or forces it to imitate. This is as much to say that Africa exists only on the basis of a preexisting library, one that intervenes and insinuates itself everywhere, even in the discourse that claims to refute it – to the point that with regard to African identity and tradition, it is now impossible to distinguish the ‘original’ from a copy (2002: 257).

The metaphor of the library is powerful. It suggests a depressing underground archive or one in which the curtains are drawn, so that we can no longer look through the window to compare the external reality with the internal image. The distinction between fact and copy has been eroded to the point where it can no longer be invoked to assert a meaningful difference. We can fight and argue endlessly, but we will never get to the truth about Ubuntu or precolonial Africa because ultimately all these arguments, positions and knowledges derive from the very archive they seem to contest.

For instance, in the case of Ubuntu, along with its description as African communitarianism comes a whole lot of conceptual and ideological baggage that sets the parameters of interpretation that keep referring our thinking back to the same order of things – liberalism, the history of communitarian thought and praxes – that predetermines the meaning of individualism in a way that makes it impossible for an African thought-complex to generate its own fault lines and questions. In this perpetual reiteration of the same order, the history of Africa is presented as, or reduced to, textual archive and the theorist to the role of mere Archivist. We can rummage through the collections as much as we like, but given the lack of written records by Africans themselves and the fact that those that do exist were all a
function of a colonialist, historic a priori, whatever we come up with will only be more texts, so that, considered in extremis, all our work will really amount to little more than moving books around or playing Scrabble with a limited number of predetermined meanings or, less extremely, constantly reinventing the invention of Africa.

The point here is firstly epistemological. The image of thought implicit in what some would claim amounts to an ontological reduction of reality to textuality is one of curating: thinking is an act of curation, a gathering of thought in which originality or authenticity can never be much more than putting different collections in conversation with each other. We can commission more works, more thought and more writing on Africa, but ultimately the meaning of any text will always be but a memorial to an Africa that never got to speak its own name and which will, to a significant extent, always remain a function of prior exhibitions and collections that predetermine the possible matrix of what it could mean.

But the point is also political because this same order that perpetually gets affirmed is a very specific, Western, racist order of things. Seen in combination with the epistemological claim, the implication here is quite devastating: not only are we condemned to speaking within an archive constructed by the West, but we seem to be inescapably committed, not only to affirming the same epistemological order, but also to reiterating a racialised political order in which black people are eternally destined to play catch-up in a game of recognition they can never win. To contest race is to affirm the reality and meaningfulness of race and to do that always already means entering the conversation fighting back.

Almost three decades after it was published, I think of Mudimbe’s *Invention of Africa* in more performative terms. A very necessary point needed to be made against the naivety and instrumentalism of Afro-radical and nativist accounts about what we realistically can expect from writing and rewriting Africa. In the subsequent decades, it is fair to say that while the notion of invention and reinvention will always recognise an inescapable indebtedness to the archive, many nuanced positions have subsequently emerged on what invention means and what the implications of that acknowledgement might entail – none of which amount to a complete reduction of reality to textuality. One such position is that of Patrick Chabal who, in the introduction to *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, writes:

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8. For a useful overview of these more nuanced positions, see Gordon (2008: 200–48).
Indeed, that body of [colonialist] scholarship must be placed in its appropriate historical context and deconstructed accordingly. The early missionaries were certainly in Africa to save souls but they may also have thought carefully about the people they sought to convert and amongst whom they lived. The pioneers of African anthropology suffered little self-doubt about their methods and certainly believed in the superiority of the West but they may also have produced first-rate accounts of the societies in which they worked. Missionaries and anthropologists spoke the local language, which is more than today’s social scientists can say . . . Just because they were the products of their colonial times does not mean that there is no merit to their work . . . The difficulty resides not in casting the anti-colonial stone but in determining the extent to which their work had value, both intrinsically and in terms of our own efforts to conceptualise politics in Africa (2009: 20–1).

Here is a sober reminder that while we may be confined to working in and against the archive, we can also take the elevator out of it. In so doing we will, of course, take with us all the knowledge we have accumulated from the archive and interpret the world in the light of that knowledge, but the experience of doing so will encourage the writing of new accounts, new books that will, in turn, find their place in the library. Every identity is always already only history in the making and Africa is perhaps only a politically acute instance of that. In fact, in a work that preceded his Foucauldian analysis of the discursive invention of Africa, L’autre face du royaume, Mudimbe speculated:

Everything takes place as if the African intellectual were trapped in an elevator that perpetually goes up and down. In principle, a single gesture would be sufficient to stop the machine, get out, and rent an apartment or a room; in sum, live and experience the reality of the world. But apparently, he does not understand that the initiative to escape belongs to him (in Jules-Rosette 2002: 604).

The Archivist remains a relevant and present persona in general and in Ubuntu texts in particular if only because two of the most extreme political stances regarding the possibility and desirability of recovering Ubuntu pivot around it: in the first place, the nativist belief that it is not only possible to say what Ubuntu is, despite
the archive, but also in the predetermination that it cannot but amount to something unique and culturally authentic – which, and this was Mudimbe’s point, cannot but deconstruct in a reiteration of a Western, modernist order of things. Second is the political stance of a smug, mostly white, intellectual overdetermination of the logic of the archive that, thriving on an overvalued epistemological impotence, barely manages to conceal a virile, racist politics of developmentalism and Western superiority of thought.

Leaving aside for now the nativist optimism that I will discuss in relation to the Prophetic persona below, the latter stance manifests most clearly in those texts where the sophistication of Mudimbe’s argument is made banal through a reduction of an epistemological conundrum to a conservatism that has radical epistemological, ontological and political implications. Here, Ubuntu is reduced to nothing more than a passing fad, just another politically correct philosophy or more African Renaissance mumbo-jumbo. Mudimbe’s careful and considered understanding of our commitment (in both senses of the word) to the archive is trivialised by a racist politics that reduces everything to the surface, to the superficially political, to the merely political, the fashionable. In the politics of this racially expedient fatalism, Western societies can constantly produce theories and ideologies suitable to their time, for their time and as a function of their time, but when Africans do it, it is merely politics, merely ideology, merely what seems necessary for the time, a mere vacuous cornerstone of an even more vacuous, because mimetic, hope of a so-called Renaissance. Of course, what remains barely concealed behind this trivialising of the African academic project and its reduction to imitation and mere fashion is the racist belief that nothing new can come out of Africa. When it comes to Ubuntu, there is nothing real, nothing we need to investigate, account for or give an account of, nothing that interrogates us, because all is passing fancy, symptomatic of the politics of the day. Characteristic of these texts is often an almost complete lack of appreciation of the politics of knowledge-production, of recognising the political as arché of all intellectual traditions, including that of the West, and very little appreciation or comprehension of the difficulties encountered by African theorists engaged in knowledge-making within Northern-dominated theoretical discourses.

Ever so slightly to the left of this reactionary racism is the belief that there may perhaps be something to be said about Ubuntu, but whatever it is amounts to little more than a reiteration or recapitulation of insights already generated by Western intellectuals who, as original modernisers, first meandered down the path of self-
discovery and enlightenment, which is really the same for everyone, so that Ubuntu now appears as little more than ‘another way of trying to make sense of western ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantian deontology’ (Murove 2009b: 16).

The Archivist, then – essentially an antipathetic persona – conjoins curating as an image of thought with a mode of being that is ghostly or spectral in order to produce a political stance committed to the belief that Africa does/not exist in and for itself, never has and never will. Africans can/not aspire to the plenitude of being. Instead, they/we are condemned to living the frustration of potential being, of eternally coming to be. Condemned in this way to merely curate re-collections of ourselves, we supposedly pass our entire lives imitating those who embody the original plenitude of being, with ridiculous pomp and circumstance, fake Vaticans, motor cavalcades and long presidential titles.

The second alternative that Mbembe defines as having emerged in opposition to the historicism of Afro-radicalism and nativism presents itself in the persona of the Cosmopolitan. Here I distinguish between a historicist and a contemporary, non-historicist variety of cosmopolitanism. The former is particularly exemplified by the anti-nationalist, Marxist cosmopolitanism of scientific Marxists who, in their debate with African Socialists, were quite content to first reduce ujamaa or ubuntu to a function of a political economy of obligation and, second, to recast this political economy in developmentalist terms as a ‘typical’ mode of production, common to all precapitalist societies. It is this ‘common to’ that reveals the Cosmopolitan image of thought as one of comparison. Maluleke’s comment below is a good example of this historicist cosmopolitanism:

We forget that ubuntu must be understood within the context of a mainly feudal socio-economic system in which the chief, the chiefdom, the clan and the extended family, were crucial providers of wealth and values . . . Given the fact that the ‘global village’ is nothing like a 16th century ‘African village’ consisting of a network of extended families, what is the effect and wisdom of recommending ubuntu to blacks in 1999 (in Kroeze 2002: 261)?

Another good example is Abdulrahman Babu’s description of African communalism:

The qualities which our petty-bourgeois intellectuals describe as essentially African are really human qualities which find expression when a community is at a certain level of productive capacity. When a community does not have the capacity to produce social surplus, there is simply no means of becoming unequal. The sense of brotherhood which is common under such conditions is essential for the survival of a community which is permanently being threatened either by natural forces, which they cannot explain, or by hostile invasion (1981: 57).

In this mode of being, thought reveals itself as the constant iteration of itself: in a certain premodern or precapitalist mode of production, all societies will manifest a similar appreciation of reciprocity and obligation, at the root of which we always find a comparable understanding of being and belonging. Accordingly, what nativists confusingly understand as a sign of Africa’s uniqueness is, at worst, no more than a forgotten praxis incongruously out of step with the requirements of life in the modern, increasingly corporatist state or, at best, the intellectual plaything of elitist statesmen who care more for the top-down imposition of nostalgia than for the bottom-up eradication of class differences and poverty.

For a more contemporary manifestation of this image of thought as iteration (viewed objectively) or comparison (viewed subjectively), ‘the world is no longer conceived as a threat. On the contrary, it is imagined as a vast network of affinities. In contrast to unanimist mythologies, the essential message here is that everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African’ (Mbembe 2002: 257–8). In general Africana scholarship, this position is well represented by Kwame Anthony Appiah who, in ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots’ (1997) among other works, has argued against a nationalist intellectualism, celebrating instead the hybridity of our identities, the fact that in a sense no one is African any longer, so we should embrace the diversity of origin and purpose that seems to be part and parcel of the postcolonial condition. There are at least two problems with this position. The first returns us to Dirlik’s criticism of Mbembe, in the sense that an untimely anti-nationalist embrace of the diversity and hybridity of our origins often makes the execution of nationalism as the emotive driving force of postcolonial state-building impossible. In the second instance, as Gordon (2007: 134–5) points out, it presupposes privileged access to the means necessary for recognising one’s own
hybridity as symptomatic of a greater, global human condition. In other words, cosmopolitanism so conceived presupposes a specific class position.\footnote{According to Gordon: ‘One can believe that one is a citizen of the world when most global institutions are already designed for one’s benefit (as opposed to others). The folly of this position comes to the fore when one imagines how ridiculous it would be to deride a poor person for failing to be cosmopolitan. It is as ridiculous as applauding a rich person or a person of fair means for globetrotting. What is cosmopolitanism, then, in its concrete practice but the assertion of the values of the affluent as the standards for everyone – including the poor? After all, cosmopolitanism is advanced by cosmopolitanists as their claim to a universal logic, or at least a near-universal one. How could such a value-system be consistent without simply erasing those who contradict it or simply rendering them irrelevant’ (2007: 134–5)?}

For the Cosmopolitan persona, the image of thought is \textit{comparative} in a dual sense. First, it suggests that all societies produce forms of communitarian thought and that the difference is really contingent or merely the context-specific outcome of a historical process that synchronises exogenous pressures with endogenous needs (identity, nation-building and so on). Second, it is comparative in the sense that thinking is about comparing the past with the present and matching what the past offers with what the present needs, by identifying those aspects of tradition that still have comparative usefulness in the present. What Cosmopolitans are after in a discourse on Ubuntu is simply the recognition that Africans are neither especially inhumane nor especially humane, neither demonically subhuman nor divinely superhuman, that peoples all over the world have communitarian traditions or philosophies and that Ubuntu is simply a local language in which to conduct universal politics.

In Ubuntu discourse, I associate this persona with a sizeable collection of texts that recognise the need for engaging with Ubuntu without exceptionalising it as unique, much less as Africa’s gift to the world. Exemplary here is Ramphele’s statement quoted earlier, which bears repeating here:

\begin{quote}
The refusal to acknowledge the similarity between \textit{ubuntu} and other humanistic philosophical approaches is in part a reflection of the parochialism of South Africans and a refusal to learn from others . . . We have to have the humility to acknowledge that we are not inventing unique problems in this country, nor are we likely to invent entirely new solutions (in Enslin and Horsthemke 2004: 548).
\end{quote}
Joe Teffo concurs:

This philosophy is encapsulated in all the philosophies of the world, though it might be articulated and actualised differently. Effectively, therefore, it would be ethnocentric and, indeed, silly to suggest that the Botho ethic is uniquely African. The mere fact that the tenets that underpin this philosophy are intensely expressed by Africans, does not make those values exclusively African (in Munyaka and Motlhabi 2009: 67).

Lastly, Mvume Dandala writes:

While *Ubuntu* finds most vocal expression, and is inherent, in African culture, it is not exclusively African. It is possible for an African not to have *Ubuntu*, whereupon people might say *asingomuntu lowo* (that one is not a person), and it is equally possible for a non-African to manifest *Ubuntu*. The law of averages, however, suggests that, from an African perspective, it is people of African origin who are most likely to have *Ubuntu* (2009: 261).

The Archivist and Cosmopolitan personae present us with a politics according to which the articulation of *Ubuntu* is either overdetermined by globalising knowledge-production under Northern hegemony or by the idea that the quest for anything local and specific amounts to little more than an outdated intellectual nationalism. While the Archivist is an antipathetic persona, the Cosmopolitan is sympathetic, to the extent that it refuses to sacrifice African humanism on the altar of sovereignty politics, while retaining the belief that it can contribute to an emancipatory politics. Beyond this, the less said about the ‘law of averages’, the better. We are left with an *Ubuntu* that, because not unique, should never imagine itself as some kind of gift to the rest of the world. The tropes of uniqueness and the ‘gift’ really belong to what appear to be the two most stable, if least interesting, personae in *Ubuntu* discourse.

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A REPORT ON UBUNTU

The local: Conformist and Prophet

Serious problems await the intellectual if she or he fails to perceive utopian and prophetic statements as such, and instead proceeds to an empirical critique as if such statements are meant not primarily to muse and to exhort, but to give a factual description.

— Wim van Binsbergen, ‘Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society’

There seem to be two main conceptual personae rooted in a political stance that maintains the possibility, if not always the desirability, of articulating Ubuntu as an endogenous tradition – an African philosophy, in the true sense of the word. These are the Conformist and the Prophet and, in what follows, I dedicate most of my attention to two subcategories of the prophetic, namely the Revolutionary and the Saviour. But first, some brief comments about the Conformist.

This persona presents a belief in the reality of Ubuntu as an original and endogenous or local philosophy, but sees in it no emancipatory praxis. Instead, it emphasises the ideological dangers of its conformism. Ubuntu does exist and can be articulated, but it is not always clear that we should bother to do so because its inherent conformism is very much at odds with a liberal, democratic understanding of liberty and personhood. Some of the texts in the Conformist persona are more forgiving than others. Least forgiving are those who read Ubuntu as strong or restrictive communitarianism or, more dismissively, as a form of collectivism. This interpretation often exceptionalises Ubuntu and by glossing over the fact that all forms of communitarianism are routinely criticised for being coercive to some extent (because they prioritise collective good over individual rights), it must be recognised as at least, or very often, a quasi-racist refusal to engage with Ubuntu simply as part of this often-problematic communitarian tradition.

Less extreme are those texts that interpret Ubuntu as part of this general communitarian tradition, but nonetheless only foresee problems in deploying it as mode of critique of post-apartheid, neocolonial, Western modernity. The fact of its

12. Thomas Kochalumchuvattil states: ‘This lack of individuation is at the root of the African crisis in identity and in the failure of the continent to sufficiently address its problems. The prevalence of communalism in African society is identified as the main barrier to the process of subjective becoming’ (2010: 108).
being a racialised communitarianism (Western individualism versus African communitarianism) often means that Ubuntu gets sucked into Eurocentric developmentalist narratives. These then schizophrenically try to balance the acceptance of Ubuntu as a valid, local form of communitarianism with its dismissal as archaic, premodern communitarian praxis. In short, while Conformists still believe in the possibility of an endogenous or local articulation of Ubuntu, they have the inverse expectation to that of the Prophet – a negativity that presents as a doomsday prophecy regarding the realisation of Ubuntu as an ideology of conformism.13 This persona is antipathetic and its image of thought shades off into what dominates the Prophetic persona in both its Revolutionary and Saviour articulations, namely thinking as recollection.

The conceptual persona of the Prophet includes the two related but distinct personae of the Revolutionary and, often but not always, building on it, that of the Saviour. The Revolutionary anticipates the end of oppression in the recovery of Ubuntu, clearly anticipated as a moment of self-recognition.14 Here, liberation from physical oppression is no more important than liberation from intellectual colonialism – in fact, mental liberation is a condition for the possibility of meaningful material liberation. This movement of recovery is often inseparable from a second movement of giving, premised on the idea that a self so uncovered has something unique to offer the world. The thought behind it is that the recognised self contains a secret knowing, an insight into being that will either complete the range of human possibilities at the End of History – Senghor’s Civilisation of the Universal – or play a more redemptive role in saving the world from the excesses of individualism. The latter is the nativism critiqued by Mbembe in its extreme form. The Revolutionary image of thought is that of recollection. It is possible, the image suggests, to recall the self, for thinking to re-member a dis-membered self, to recognise its former ways of thinking and being and to reinstitute these in the present, in order to give effect to Kwame Nkrumah’s dream when he exhorted: ‘We should write our history as the history of our society in all its fullness. Its history should be a reflection of its self, and contact with Europeans should only figure in it from the viewpoint of the African experience’ (in Bayart 1993: 6).

14. This persona manifests in some form in the vast majority of texts. Some interesting examples include Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009), Murithi (2009) and McDonald (2010).
In its most extreme manifestation, such an act of recollection promises to sweep away all Western ways of being and their institutionalised oppression, while in its less extreme versions, it aims to soften the blow of an inescapable alienation by ‘Africanising’ our postcolonial institutions so that, at the very least, we can recognise in them the contemporary residue of a historical self. If the mode of being presupposed by Descartes’s *cogito* was that of the solipsistic Idiot, the mode of being implicit here is again, but for entirely different reasons, that of the *ghost* or *spectre* we have already encountered in the Archivist. A ghost is neither here nor there, trapped between this world and the next, neither of nor in this world, never wholly in/outside. Ghosts never simply inhabit the past or the present. We cannot commit them – or what happened to them in this life – to memory in order to ‘move on’ because they remain haunted by an incident that left them suspended between two worlds. The Revolutionary lives a ghostly life, premised on the belief that *life*, *true life*, is possible or must always remain a possibility: ‘I will only truly exist,’ the Revolutionary consoles him or herself, ‘once I have recollected the self; until then, the self is a mere shadow of its former self; a shell, an oppressive invention of the Other.’ Ghosts haunt us in the same way that we are haunted by the possibility of being ourselves. Driven by remembrance of things past and fervently hoping to bring about a future in which the self will no longer be different from that memory (being *différance*), the dream is not merely one of being present, but of existing as tautology (‘I am my self’). In short, the Revolutionary mode of being is spectral because it inhabits neither the present, nor the past, or the future. Here, I am thinking of Nyerere who, addressing his fellow Tanzanians in this mode of Revolutionary, proclaimed: ‘Our first step, therefore, must be to re-educate ourselves; to regain our former attitude of mind. In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us’ (1967b: 166) and furthermore, ‘We must, as I have said, regain our former attitude of mind – our traditional African socialism – and apply it to the new societies we are building today’ (167). At work in the Revolutionary discourse on Ubuntu is not only the belief and hope that Ubuntu can be recovered and articulated in all its locality, but also a problematic conception of *iteration*, in which Ubuntu is repeatable in the present as it was in the past, instead of recognising that the iteration of the past in the present renders the present a constitutive and defining moment of the past. Simply put, what the Revolutionary discourse on Ubuntu underestimates is that the meaning of Ubuntu will never be what we manage to recollect of it (so that we can bring the past into the present).
On the contrary, its meaning will always, in part, be informed by the reasons for its recollection (which places the present in the past).

Such a critique of the Revolutionary conceptual persona is not intended as a judgement or even as a criticism. On this point, there is tentative agreement between myself and Wim van Binsbergen that will further resonate with the statement by Deleuze and Guattari used as an epigraph to this chapter: ‘We will not say of many books of philosophy that they are false, for that is to say nothing, but rather that they lack importance or interest, precisely because they do not create any concept or contribute an image of thought or beget a persona worth the effort’ (1994: 182–3). For Van Binsbergen, and hypothetically Deleuze and Guattari, the least interesting question here would be to ask whether the Revolutionary is right or wrong, whether what he or she proposes is possible or impossible. For Van Binsbergen, Revolutionary Ubuntu claims are not locutionary (i.e., truth claims), but rather perlocutionary (i.e., they perform political work). In terms of the notion of hypermodernity to be discussed later, we can also say that Revolutionary calls to recollect Ubuntu – however contradictory and problematic – derive their urgency, legitimacy and relevance not in the first instance from their status as truth claims, but from the fact that they exhort and inspire, from executing political work that may (not will) otherwise remain inexed (and perhaps inexutable) in the absence of a teleology of purpose. With the execution of political work in a context of nationalism, I have something very specific in mind. All nationalisms – political and cultural – require a transcendental sense of purpose to legitimise their performance or the execution of the work they imagine needs to be done. By teleology of purpose, I mean some Blut und Boden myth or a story about being God’s Elect, predestination or, however metaphorially vague, of being a Promethean bearer of light to other peoples and nations. In the case of Africa, the nationalist myth is grounded in the grand-narrative myth of returning Africa to itself. Such myths need to be accepted as true in order for the political work committed in their name to be successful; that is, executable. In other words, the performance or execution of political work is a direct function of the extent to which its founding myth remains opaque (or sufficiently opaque) to a variety of actors in the relevant political domain, including those with executive powers and those who find themselves at the executed end, as Means to an End: the executors and executees, as it were.

Where a modernity such as postcoloniality is fundamentally constituted – due to larger theoretical frames such as postmodernism and world-historical
developments such as the radical separation of political and economic sovereignty in a time of globalisation – as the impossibility of the politically opaque; that is, the impossibility of legitimating its execution with reference to what ostensibly exists outside the political domain, a whole range of questions have to be fundamentally rethought. What is the real possibility of constituting a ‘we’ in the absence of a legitimising myth or shared *nomos*? What is the nature of the relationship between locutionary and perlocutionary statements in such a political domain? Are the former necessarily superior (because true) to the latter that can, at best, claim some kind of family resemblance with the concept of truth? Or do performative claims perhaps gain increased legitimacy from the simple fact that, unlike locutionary statements about the world, perlocutionary statements are more directly instrumental in the creation of the world – in this case, the creation of a political collective subject or ‘we’? The low-key drama that is the Ubuntu debate is shadowed, then, by bigger questions about how to legitimise and found the existence of the African cultural subject and its political projects – beyond the category confusion of claiming to have a ‘right to a philosophy’ – in a world that is increasingly becoming immanent, a world in which politics increasingly has to justify itself in the name of the political itself and not with reference to any extra-political legitimations, such as various forms of historicisms, the myth of the Promethean (traditional colonialist and contemporary United States alike) and so on. In short, the question becomes about how to create a foundation for the articulation of a self after a politics of the opaque. I think of such a context as the historical condition of the possibility for the dominance of one particular conceptual persona in the Ubuntu discourse, namely the Saviour.

*The Saviour*

The Saviour, not content with liberating the self through an act of self-recognition, sees in Ubuntu the additional potential to free the rest of the world from its misplaced infatuation with individualism.15 Building on the Revolutionary commitment to emancipation, the Saviour finds in Ubuntu a communitarianism (now presented as paradoxical humanism) superior to other, particularly Western, equivalents. I say ‘paradoxical’ because in terms of this persona, Ubuntu’s perceived superiority derives

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15. Among the many texts that manifest the Saviour persona see, for example, Ngoenha (2006) and Nussbaum (2003).
from the fact that it combines what is most specific to humanism (a dedication to immanence, to the recognition that ‘we are all we have’) with what is most at odds with humanism, namely hints of the sacred that are no doubt traces of an ontological commitment to an onto-triadic understanding of community. As an interstitial humanism – poised in the difference between its sacred and profane commitments – it appears as an apophatic, even ecstatic humanism (reminiscent of Frantz Fanon) that holds out the promise of a politics beyond politics, a politics of grace, of grace as a way of doing politics (think Nelson Mandela). In other words, only against a backdrop of near global boredom with what it means to live in a disenchanted world, only in a world where the generative or creational dimension of violence has given way almost entirely to recreational violence, in order to reveal the apocalyptic horror of disenchantment as nomos, only in such a world can Ubuntu theorists repackage its historical proximity to the sacred as the new politics of the sacral." 

And therein lies something very specific about Ubuntu, a specificity that derives not from what it is, but from the time when it becomes visible as alternative point of entry to the Abrahamic, as a source for the appreciation of what is sacred about human life. Ubuntu's specificity, then, lies not in what it is, but in when it is; more accurately perhaps, in when it gets to be what it gets to be, so that if we absolutely must insist on associating this specificity with what Ubuntu is, let the ‘what’ refer to u/Ubuntu as interstitial humanism.

With the persona of the Saviour, we enter the complex terrain in which the African theorist constructs a locally based, but globally influential imaginaire on the basis of the meaning of African ethics. This structure requires of the African subject to imagine how African ethics will fit into global ethical structures and demands. At a cultural-identity level, this often assumes the logic first articulated by Senghor in his notion of a Civilisation of the Universal. Essentially an argument for a vision of global pluralism, it suggests that if we want to understand what it means to be human, we need to consider the full range of contributions from all societies and civilisations on the subject. Here, the logic is one of contribution.

A slightly stronger and more optimistic imaginaire is one in which the African ethic circles out to redefine first, postcolonial African society, then the nation and

16. The theological overtones here are no mere accident. The discourse on South Africa’s transition predominantly presents as a kind of political theology, of which Ubuntu-based talk of being a Saviour or World Redeemer would simply be an extension.
from there, proceeds to reconfigure the whole global system of interdependent societies and cultures. Again, Senghor’s widening of the logic of the homeland is an example, as is Ali Mazrui’s articulation of the expansionist dreams of Nyerere’s Ujamaa project:

Long before welfare socialism was established in Britain, Africa had developed a system of collective responsibility for orphans, the infirm, the aged and the needy. African communities had historically looked after their most vulnerable members. From former German East Africa (Tanganyika), Nyerere expanded this African sense of family into the basis of the modern socialist ethic of sharing . . . This chapter goes a step further to globalise *ujamaa* into an ethic for the human family as a whole (2009: 38).

Here, the logic is no longer one of *contribution*, but rather one of *re-creating* the world in its own image. This often amounts to visions of, as we can now articulate it, Ubuntu the interstitial humanism as salvific ethic. Claims range from the meek, who see Ubuntu as something that can ‘supply something that our dominant scientific culture lacks’ or that ‘it has something unique that we can make use of for ourselves and also offer to the world’ (Shutte 2009: 85, 99), to the stronger claim that ‘African ethics can indeed be seen as a salvatory power in today’s heartlessly globalising world, a potential moral saviour in a time of deep trouble’ (Prozesky 2009: 12).

With this persona, then, I have in mind those knowledge-constructs that not only think it possible to recollect the meaning of Ubuntu, but also for whom the sense of purpose that motivates the recovery, far from being limited to the elusive promise of founding a national self, derives from the projection onto the world stage of one of the other familiar tenets associated with Ubuntu in the popular imagination, ‘freedom is indivisible’. If the image of thought of the Revolutionary is *recollection*, the Saviour’s is *redemptive*, perhaps even eschatological. Thinking may be about recollection or recovery as the Revolutionary maintains, but this, argues the Saviour, is only a preliminary to the real meaning of thinking, which is to act as a conduit to the global redemptive or eschatological. Implicitly at work in this mode of thinking is something vaguely Heideggerian, something of a ‘world disclosure’, in which an improbably post-sovereign subject merely discloses to the world the innermost nature of its interdependent being. In this instance, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the appearance of grace and the politics of grace, a World-Disclosing Humility and the ultimate violence of sovereignty,
power merely masquerading as humanism and grace. Ultimately I think there is indeed something of a world-disclosing possibility in this interstitial humanism, but in order to disclose it, the interrogation of its identitarian subtext needs further development, in order to reveal something of the violence involved in its flirtation with sovereign subjectivity and the seductions of soft power.

Anybody who speaks of how special or unique Ubuntu is inadvertently steps into a tradition that has prepared in advance a specific reception for that claim. I am thinking of Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) who, in his *Historia Naturalis* (Natural History), memorably exclaimed: *‘Semper aliquid novi Africam adferre’* (Africa always brings [us] something new) – a popular cliché about the continent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fashionable contemporary academic discourse, this would refer to the exoticising eye, the eye that makes of a person or a place an exotic Other, always marvelled at, but for that very reason, never simply considered part of the community. In contemplating how Ubuntu theorists write and speak of themselves, we have to consider the extent to which this exoticising eye has penetrated consciousness and the reflection of the self on the self. Of course, this exoticism is not unrelated to the phenomenon of double consciousness that I touched on in the previous chapter. There, in the discussion of two global a prioris, I suggested that the whole nexus of issues we are dealing with here – blackness, being African, being communal, having Ubuntu – is a function of a very specific historical discourse or order of things, namely a racialised, Western modernity. It is only as a result of and through this discourse that Africans came to think of themselves in the binary terms of ‘being black’, of ‘all having something in common’, of ‘being African’, of having ‘authentic ways of being and belonging’ and of ‘having u/Ubuntu’. The fundamental problem here is the dialectic of recognition through which a Revolutionary recovery of the self always proceeds as reappropriation of the self through the exoticising eyes of the Other – thereby, as Mudimbe was earlier quoted as saying, always returning in order to affirm and confirm the same epistemological and political order of things. In the introduction, I pointed out how Fanon justified his stance on violence as a response to exactly this problem: in order for a racist system to change, white people first have to recognise black people as people, as human beings. Where such recognition is unlikely ever to come about as the result of black people’s commitment to the ethics of dialogue, they should stop waiting for it, suspend the ethical and instead resort to armed struggle, as the only way of bringing about a system premised on the humanist bottom line that *all humans are humans and therefore equal.*
South Africa’s so-called miraculous transition to democracy has suggested an alternative: it is possible to negotiate a fundamental turnaround dialogically. However, there are at least two problems with this story: first, the transition was not a ‘turn-about’ (see Marais 2011: 69–96) as much as it was a carefully constructed agreement on how to change things without turning them about, so that the result has been little more than a changing of the guards that has left the racial fault lines of poverty more or less unchanged. Second, the transition was not peaceful – unless, that is, we exclude from the story the thousands of mostly black people killed, maimed and displaced in the struggle against apartheid (Praeg, forthcoming, in Redekop and Ryba’s *Creative Reconciliation*). In recognising the extent to which South Africa did not go up in flames at the moment of transition, we like to give an occasional nod to the role Ubuntu played in the conceptualisation and proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There can be no doubting this role. But the mistake we make is to insert Ubuntu as shorthand for reconciliation, forgiveness and shared humanity into a violence/non-violence binary, in which Ubuntu is understood solely and simply as a gift that redeems, not one that conflicts and contests in a way that reproduces the violence of sovereignty. This violence needs to be surfaced as part of Ubuntu discourse, in fact, as a recognition of the condition of its possibility that follows directly from what it means to accept, as I argued in the introduction that we should, the political as First Philosophy.

In the remainder of this chapter, I trace the outlines of this relationship between African humanism and the violence of sovereignty inherent in its identity politics by considering a very timid, perhaps even soft version of that violence. It is a violence born of what I earlier called the paradox of differentiation that emerges when a philosophy of relationships is premised on the severance of relationships, a severance committed in the name of sovereignty politics, of wanting to use Ubuntu or the idea of ‘shared humanity’ as cultural capital to purchase political ends that, while often committed in the name of our shared humanity, more often than not effect very little that is shared, exactly because, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate, the violence necessary to conceive of our shared humanity, as Ideology trickles down as the violence necessary to sustain our shared humanity as humanism, as Ideology. If we examine the logic of Ubuntu as a gift more closely, we will find that it too succumbs to the violence of soft power, to a certain self-mutilation or an autoviolation of the very subjectivity to which it seeks to restore dignity and a place in the world. To reinsert Ubuntu as humanist praxis in the world as a mode of critique also, and particularly of the violence associated with Western modernity
and its sovereignty politics, we have to start at home and make visible Ubuntu’s own complicity in this violence. I want to do this by starting at an individual level, by considering the logic of the gift in relation to the Other and how this violence plays itself out at the level of global politics.

**The gift: Where Saviour meets Idiot**

Let us pause, then, to consider another animal altogether, not one that was ever exported from Africa – in fact, not one that is particularly associated with Africa at all, but comes to us from a story Danish author Karen von Blixen-Finecke, writing as Isak Dinesen, recounts in the memoir she is most famous for, *Out of Africa* (first published in 1937), a story she was told, or perhaps read, as a child:

A man, who lived by a pond, was awakened one night by a great noise. He went out into the night and headed for the pond, but in the darkness, running up and down, back and forth, guided only by the noise, he stumbled and fell repeatedly. At last, he found a leak in the dike, from which water and fish were escaping. He set to work plugging the leak and only when he had finished went back to bed. The next morning, looking out of the window, he saw with surprise that his footprints had traced a figure of a stork on the ground (in Du Toit 2008: 424).

Now, what can we learn from this story of the stork? Blixen herself mused: ‘When the design of my life is complete, will I see, or will others see a stork?’ (in Cavarero 2000: 1). The idea of a pattern is comforting because it suggests the possibility of life as patterned meaning, a pattern that ‘reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events’ (2). This is a comforting thought indeed, for it suggests that when all the ramblings and scramblings are over, if I were to sit back, a pattern would emerge to reveal that all the while, unbeknown to me, my life made sense; it unfolded a pattern that only appeared random to me at the time because I was too immersed in living my life to recognise it. Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero is more eloquent about this:

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17. My gratitude to Louise du Toit for bringing this story to my attention (see Du Toit 2008). The story is also discussed and analysed in Cavarero (2000).
The significance of the story lies precisely in the figural unity of the design, and in this simple ‘resulting,’ which does not follow from any projected plan. In other words, the design – which does not consist simply of confused marks, but has the unity of a figure – is not one that guides the course of a life from the beginning. Rather, the design is what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind (2000: 1).

For Cavarero, the recognition of life as meaningful is conditioned on recognising the importance of three things: unity, the Other and the gift. Let us consider these in the sequence of their unfolding. The meaning of a life results from or is a function of its unity, of everything somehow ‘hanging together’. This unity, however, has an apophatic or negative quality about it because its very possibility is premised on its opposite, on not going for unity, of not planning in advance what that unity will be about, but on actively living one’s life, being immersed in it, making patterns while going about the seemingly random and pointless business of living. In other words, the unity or meaning of life does not precede life as a pattern that we set out to make, but rather unintentionally results from it. When that pattern emerges, Cavarero writes, it is only from an external perspective of an Other who is looking on. Why can it not emerge from my own perspective? Why can I not stand back, like the man in the story, and look at the pattern of my life in order to narrate its unity? Why can I not gather the meaning of my life from looking at what living it has revealed about me? Is this not what all autobiography is about? Yes, and this is ultimately also the failure of autobiography: however self-reflective and self-critical I may be, given that my reflection is part of my life, it follows that my reflection will also replicate the very pattern that it reflects on. Try as I might, I cannot extricate myself from the life I live in order to reflect on it. Autobiography will always be only more tracks around the pond: because ‘the one who walks on the ground cannot see the figure that his/her footsteps leave behind . . . he/she needs another perspective’ (Cavarero 2000: 3) to reveal the figure to him/herself. It takes an Other person to look at my life, in order to narrate its patterned unity. This is why there is ‘an ethic of the gift in the pleasure of the narrator. The one who narrates not only entertains and enchants . . . but gives to the protagonist of his/her story their own stork.’ We all desire to be narrated by another – not so that we can get the facts right, but because we desire ‘the unity . . . which this tale confers to identity’ (xvii), the unity that can only come from another’s mouth.
What does all of this have to do with Ubuntu? Let us start by noting an important difference between different forms of nativism, between négritude and Ubuntu, between Senghor’s laconic vision of an anticipated future pattern called the Civilisation of the Universal and the banality of much local discourse on Ubuntu as a gift to the world. Mbembe touches on this difference between the softer version of Senghor’s universalist nativism and the banality of the stronger nativism:

In the most extreme version of nativism, difference is thus praised, not as the symptom of a greater universality, but rather as the inspiration for determining principles and norms governing Africans’ lives in full autonomy and, if necessary, in opposition to the world. Softer versions leave open the possibility of ‘working toward the universal’ and enriching Western rationality by adding to it the ‘values of black civilization,’ the ‘genius peculiar to the black race.’ This is what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls *le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir* (the meeting point of giving and receiving) (2002: 255). Similarly, Nyerere comments:

It was in the struggle to break the grip of colonialism that we learnt the need for unity. We came to recognize that the same socialist attitude of mind which, in the tribal days, gave to every individual the security that comes of belonging to a widely extended family, must be preserved within the still wider society of the nation. But we should not stop there. Our recognition of the family to which we all belong must be extended yet further – beyond the tribe, the community, the nation, or even the continent – to embrace the whole society of mankind. This is the only logical conclusion for true socialism (1967b: 171).

The issue at stake in both softer and more extreme versions of nativism is the reinvention of the self in a manner that presupposes as *arché*, or point of origin, a self-reflective appreciation of what this reinvented self is going to mean, prior to its engagement with the Other. To concretise: when Ubuntu is self-consciously reinvented as gift, we decide the unity in advance and therefore the meaning of being African prior to the dialogue that may (or may not) recognise Ubuntu as bringing a gift, as making a contribution. As the story of the stork illustrates, it is
not for the bearer of the gift to decide this. It is for the Other to narrate that unity as constituting a gift by saying, ‘I have received a gift.’ In this manner, the meaning of Ubuntu will be left to temporality and time, to letting a difference emerge, instead of that difference being constituted as such in advance. To be sure, there are certain Western commentators who write in the gift mode about Ubuntu (as having received a gift) and one would have to investigate how or to what extent those writings reproduce the assumptions of exoticism that have always characterised writing on Africa. This is not my focus here. My concern is with writing from Africa, by Africans, in the mode of the Saviour, in which the meaning of Ubuntu is constructed through a definitional circularity that creates the space for the predetermination of Ubuntu as gift to the world. This predetermination amounts to little more than a narcissistic tautology, an act of self-definition or ‘interior monologue’ (Cavarero 2000: 35) masquerading as dialogue with the Other. It is a form of African autobiographical thought acting as biography, a self-definition that pretends to emerge from an imaginary encounter with the Other.

There is something deeply unsatisfactory about a self who narrates itself, as opposed to letting itself be narrated by another. As Cavarero notes:

The life-story that memory recounts is not enough for the narratable self. Not so much because the memory proceeds like a voluble and discontinuous narration, or because the demon of self-interpretation produces mythical-biographical texts, but rather because memory claims to have seen that which was instead revealed only through the gaze of another (2000: 40).

The point I am making is that a discourse that self-nominates itself as gift to the world defines itself in a way that ‘claims to have seen that which [should or can be] revealed only through the gaze of another’. Between this ‘sort of interior monologue’ and the dictum ‘I am because we are’, a radical tension arises that I earlier called the paradox of differentiation and which we can now also articulate as the paradox of postcolonial subjectivity, for that is what the excursion into the Dinesen story allows us to see: the mode of being or persona that engages in this interior monologue of a pre-emptive gift is not the persona or mode of being implicit in ‘I am because we are’, but one much closer to the Cartesian Idiot, one for whom the self self-affirms its own existence and identity and who inhabits a world in which ‘I think therefore I am’ effortlessly translates into ‘I know my self is/as gift to the world therefore I am’ – a tragic substitution of self-recognition for the eternally deferred recognition by the Other.
Augustine Shutte reminds us of the logic of the gift that would be consonant with the logic of Ubuntu when he writes that an important aspect of a person existing only in relation to others is that personhood is a gift. We have already seen that it is not something already there at the beginning of a person’s life. But *nor is it something that one can acquire through one’s own power*. Instead it comes to me from others as a gift. If it is not given it cannot be acquired (2009: 92).

In other words, ‘personhood comes as a gift from other persons’ (Shutte 2001:12; also Christians 2004: 241). This is not the logic we find at work in the persona of the self-nominating Saviour as bearer of redemptive gifts. Instead, here, the self is the protagonist of a game that celebrates the *self as other*, precisely because the self here presupposes the absence of another who truly is *an* other. In this sense, by bringing together the *auto*, the *bios*, and the *graphein*, the self conquers for itself an absolute unity and self-sufficiency (Cavarero 2000: 40).

This self-sufficiency (autonomy, sovereignty) is purchased both at the cost of what the self represents (I am because we are) and, by implication, any authentic relation with the Other, substituted by ‘the fantasmatic product of a doubling, the supplement of an absence, the parody of a relation’ (Cavarero 2000: xiv). At this point, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that since so much local thinking about Ubuntu manifests the gift-bearing persona of the Saviour, Ubuntu thinking is deeply implicated in the violent logic of sovereignty, a logic constituted or arrived at through two forms of violence that we can denote as *Other-violation* and *auto-violation*.

The Other-violation is executed in the definitional circularity I discussed earlier. It is at work in any text that legitimises the *raison d’être* of Ubuntu with a violent differentiation that excludes any trace of a relational subjectivity from its image of the West (see Marx 2002: 59–62). Typical of this Other-violation are statements such as: ‘The most important difference in the conception of human beings between Eurocentric and Africentric philosophical models is that the African viewpoint espouses harmony and collectivity, whilst the Eurocentric point of view emphasises a more individualistic orientation towards life’ (Venter 2004: 152). Only through such an Other-violation can Ubuntu be posited as an alternative, a redemptive
humanism that emphasises and reminds us of our interdependence, our communality. Only through this Other-violation is the enunciative space created for the emergence of a discourse on Ubuntu-as-gift.

This Other-violation is also a condition for the further, or secondary, auto-violation that follows. If the Other is violated through the construction of its identity in terms that purposefully and consciously omit central features of its intellectual and political history, the secondary auto- or self-violation consists in conceiving the resulting politics of the redemptive self or Saviour in terms of an individualism radically at odds with the communalism generated as a function of the Other-violation. The African subject becomes the very individualist subject it wants to redeem. Only on the basis of these two expressions of violence does a conception of the African self as world redeemer become possible. The Saviour steps onto the world stage of cultural politics through a movement that sees claims about our shared humanity deconstructed by the politics of sovereignty. Formulated differently, the Saviour emerges at the exact point where the politics of sovereignty is deconstructed by appeals to a shared humanity that remain deferred by the politics of sovereignty and a rhetoric, however implicit, that is not very far removed from certain oppressive historical tropes – of the black subject as Promethean bearer of light, the ‘black man’s burden’ and so on. If the mode of being of the Cosmopolitan is that of belonging, the mode of being implicit in the Saviour is that of solitary redeemer who lives, at best, with a future anticipation of belonging.

None of this should be interpreted as a problem of blackness or Africanness. It is a problem of thinking identity and meaning in terms of the historical and conceptual a priori of Western modernity. The dilemma for the black subject here is that this a priori cannot but commit it to both an Other-violation and an auto-violation – two forms of violence that are a function of each other, as mutually constitutive of each other as the claim to interdependence in whose name they are committed.

The subject so invented is a teleologically conceived subject and much of African philosophy in general and the Ubuntu discourse in particular legitimised and continues to legitimise itself with reference to a teleological, even messianic End that lends it a certain performative urgency. Fundamental to concealing the secret at work in this teleological bootstrapping as belated politics of the opaque is what I earlier called the pretence of a certain World-Disclosing Humility, through which philosophical thinking is ostensibly alienated from the political subject, in order for (its) thought to present itself as the World contemplating its true interdependent nature. Both postulates – that of a Civilisation of the Universal and Ubuntu as
Redemptive Gift – erase, through sheer assumed necessity, a contingent, historical subject who posits the teleology only for the postulate itself to appear as but one anonymous moment in a seemingly inescapable, unfolding teleology (the historicism of nativism). Of course, there is a crucial difference between the postulate of the Civilisation of the Universal and Ubuntu as Redemptive Gift, between thinking as contribution and thinking as redemptive re-configuration. The former is predominantly (but not exclusively) teleological, in the sense that what it projects into the future is the realisation of pluralism as the minimum condition for the political. As Mudimbe comments about authors who project this view:

They believe that there is an African tradition in itself and consider themselves as the interpreters of this particular experience . . . Yet in stating that Africans have their own distinct mode of being, they insist that this singularity is the condition of universality: if there were no particular individuals and traditions, there could be no real universals (1991b: 45).18

This is not the case for the Saviour persona. At work in its teleological projection is something of an Aristotelian understanding of teleology, of formal and final causes in which, as Walter Stace comments:

The idea of the end, the final cause, is thus the real ultimate cause of the movement. Only, in the case of human production, the idea of the end is actually present in the sculptor’s mind as a motive. In nature there is no mind in which the end is conscious of itself, but nevertheless nature moves towards the end, and the end is the cause of the movement (1962: 274).

There is a specific sense then in which, for the conceptual persona of the Saviour, the End is present at the Beginning or even anterior to it as Beginning.19 In the

18. It seems to me that the contemporary version of the Civilisation of the Universal is the discourse on a global ethic, as argued by Mazrui (2009: 36).
19. Bearing in mind that Aristotle’s notion of ‘causality’ includes whatever facts, principles or reasons necessary to explain the existence of something, the relationship between négritude and the Civilisation of the Universal would be one of matter to form, of history as a movement from matter to form – where matter, i.e., the characteristics of being African, derives meaning or reason from form; that is, from history as efficient cause, the Idea of négritude as formal cause and the Civilisation of the Universal as final cause.
interim – or postcoloniality conceived as interregnum – this difference manifests either, in terms of values, as a paradox of differentiation or, in terms of identity, as a hybrid subjectivity, whose putative self-understanding is temporarily contradicted by the politics conducted in its name. Of course, part of this bootstrapping teleology is the world-disclosing erasure of the paradox or hybridity itself, its anticipated overcoming at some distant point in the mythological future when Ubuntu’s ontology of interdependence will have reconfigured the global political order in terms of this interconnectedness, an Ubuntu-based post-sovereignty. If there is a messianic structure in Ubuntu discourse, it reveals itself most clearly in this promise that a day, irreducible and heterogenous to the condition of postcoloniality, will arrive when Ubuntu’s politics will once again be consistent with its ontology.

But it is not sufficient only to be critical of the image of thought and the mode of thinking associated with the Saviour and of how they conjoin to form a political stance riddled with overstretching contradictions and paradoxes. For this perceived failure of African humanism, the manner in which it can only position itself in the world through a paradox of differentiation, while articulating a subjectivity at odds with what it holds most dear, this ‘failure’ is not a failure of African humanism per se. On the contrary, it is a function of a historic a priori, of which the master trope in various contexts appears as ‘individual’, ‘independence’, ‘autonomy’, ‘sovereignty’ and so on. Second, in as much as it then still makes sense to talk about all these contradictions and paradoxes as ‘failures’, it is perhaps the necessary failure of any humanism, the failure that allows it to intervene in politics, only to withdraw again as a ‘failure’ in order to reappear again, later, as the renewed assertion of the imperative to humanise the world.

Everywhere humanism intervenes in the world, it cannot do so except on the basis of a fundamental denial or self-destructive contradiction of what it holds most dear, namely the belief that the human is sacred. Every time humanism is deployed to make a move in the world of politics, it can only do so by compromising into the world of politics, by adopting certain strategies, modes of thinking and by acting politically, strategically and with some end in mind. This is, after all, the problem with thinking of humanism as humanism. The moment we conceive of it as an ‘-ism’, we have already sacrificed what is most particular about it, namely that it is not an ideology or a thing, but a mode of critique, a mode of advancing the ideal – the quasi-transcendental ideal – of human plenitude. But this sacrifice is as necessary as the political engagements made possible by it. The persona of the
Prophet, in its twin manifestations as Revolutionary and Saviour, exactly because they advance the emancipatory project and not despite their failure to do so without contradicting themselves, can therefore be considered truly sympathetic personae – or, perhaps simply pathetic, in the original sense of the word that originated in the sixteenth century, via late Latin from the Greek *pathétikos*, based on *pathos*, ‘suffering’.

*The dirty work of grace*

A week after Tanganyika achieved formal independence from the British, Nyerere made the following statement to the United Nations General Assembly:

> It goes against my grain as a nationalist to say thank you to anybody for the achievement of our independence except to the people of Tanganyika. But . . . I want to express our most sincere appreciation both to this Organization for the keen interest it took in our affairs and to our former governors, and now our friends, the British. I might say that I do congratulate the British for taking yet a further step towards their own achievement of complete independence and freedom because I believe that no country is completely free if it keeps other people in a state of unfreedom (1967b: 144–5, emphasis added).

In what reads in many ways as a ceremonial acceptance speech, the representative of the formerly oppressed, instead of indulging in realist politics, celebrates freedom – not their own freedom, autonomy and sovereignty, but that of the former oppressor who now, *only now*, is decolonising itself, realising its own freedom from oppressing itself via and through the oppression of the colonised. This is treacherously close to grace as hubris or the hubris of grace. But we need not be that negative. In fact, such negativity is possibly a racist form of hubris itself. For we know this gesture, we have been witness to it many times since. It is what happens when humanism in general, but postcolonial interstitial humanism specifically, enters the world of politics in order to do *what it cannot but fail to do*. We know this gesture as the claim that freedom is indivisible as argued, replayed, reiterated again many years later by Mandela: ‘I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed’ (in Nussbaum 2009b: 105). More heart-rending is Cynthia Ngewu’s statement quoted in the previous chapter:
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 (in Praeg 2000: 275).

What is so profound about these statements? Perhaps it is simply that as acts of ubuntu or ubuntu praxis, they somehow speak to us from beyond the limitations of the episteme or historic a priori that ensnares the discourse on Ubuntu in so many paradoxes and contradictions. The statements by Ngewu and Mandela (and, of course, I am taking them out of context here in order to make a point) are truly sublime because they speak the language of a certain post-subjectivity that reveals the possibility of a World-Disclosing Humility. What we do not see in these two statements, though, and what we must remain sensitive to, is the sacrificial logic of this Disclosure that both Ngewu and Mandela would have to confront outside of the idealised context into which I have abstracted them here, namely the manner in which this humanism always must compromise into the dirty work of politics in a way that reveals a fascinating oscillation between accomplishment and failure – the accomplishment of politics as the failure of humanism and the accomplishment of humanism in revealing the failure of politics. This we see clearly in Nyerere's speech, delivered at a place that can in many ways be considered the heart of the political, namely the United Nations General Assembly, where states battle to defend and promote their real interests.

The sacrifice presents as the conflict between the two hearts in Nyerere's breast, in the manner in which his soul is presented as a battleground, where the Revolutionary nationalist and the World-Redeeming Saviour have to battle it out. Who will he be in this moment? Will he be the self-congratulatory Revolutionary, proud politician, master of the agonistics of the political? Or will he be the humble Saviour, mere conduit of the freedom of us all? And if he were to act as mere conduit of our collective freedom, would he avoid turning this status into soft power, in order to advance the self-interest of the Tanganyikan state?

He wavers. He recognises that it 'goes against my grain as a nationalist to say thank you to anybody for the achievement of our independence except to the people of Tanganyika'. And yet, and yet . . . he goes on to to thank not only the United Nations, but also his country’s former governor for this freedom. Why does he hesitate so? One might ask: What is so terrible about thanking the coloniser for
granting freedom? And one might answer: power. If Fanon understood one thing clearly, it is that a slave who is set free by the master is not yet free, precisely because he or she was set free by the master. Only a freedom willed and seized by the slave amounts to true freedom. A freedom granted is not real; freedom asserted is. But this is Nyerere’s problem. The independence of Tanganyka did not come at the end of a violent historical revolution, through which the formerly oppressed asserted their freedom. To be sure, there was significant anti-colonial resistance, but the independence that arrived could never simply be construed as freedom seized. Enter the sacrificial movement of a World-Disclosing Humanism. There is only one way out of this dead end and that consists in turning the tables on the former governor, to assert that in perhaps the most important sense possible and therefore the only sense that, being irreducible to mere politics, truly matters, it was never (only or primarily) about the Tanganyikans achieving independence but (at the same time, or rather) about the British governors ‘taking yet a further step towards their own achievement of complete independence and freedom’. After all, ‘no country is completely free if it keeps other people in a state of unfreedom’. Freedom is indivisible. The inversion is complete: a graceful move has allowed Nyerere to slip out the back door of the dialectic of freedom posited by Fanon. Between an emasculating freedom granted and a virile independence asserted, a third option suddenly appears: a graceful exit that asserts the indivisibility of freedom, an insistence that refuses the reduction of freedom to the agonistic of individualism, a true and sublime communitarian praxis that seems to trivialise realist politics with its humanist splendour.

But things are invariably more complex than they seem. As the first president of a newly independent country, Nyerere only had a couple of minutes to make a good first impression on the other world leaders present at the General Assembly. He had already started with an apology for the fact that his speech was going to be ‘slightly longer’ than convention allows. He was motivated by the fact that he had to establish the imprint of his nation on the minds of the wary, tired realists of state politics, to show them that he and his people would be of value to this austere collection of states and that they did not come empty-handed to the table – much in the same way that Senghor invented nègritude, in order not to arrive empty-handed at the cultural version of the United Nations, the Civilisation of the Universal. In short, the truth of his World-Disclosing Humility has to be actualised as politics and therein lie the sacrifice and the necessary failure of humanism.
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For some states (but also individuals), there is only one way to redeem their insignificance and that is to augment it, emphasise it and then to demonstrate the inherent usefulness, even superiority of this radical insignificance. It is a paradox Nyerere had negotiated before in an article published in the *Royal Commonwealth Society Journal* of December 1961:

It is in the latter respect that we may have something to contribute to the Commonwealth. Our present *unimportance* in world power terms, and our comparative freedom from past involvements in world politics can be of *signal assistance* in bringing a new view to the councils of the Commonwealth . . . And *the only way we can hope to gain any prestige in the world is by a record of honest and serious consideration of any issues which might arise, and by the taking of attitudes based on what we believe to be right. In other words, our unimportance gives us an opportunity to be somewhat objective – which can only be of value to the Commonwealth* (1967b: 135–6, emphasis added).

Effectively it is Tanganyika’s supreme unimportance that could make it supremely important. It is our unimportance, Nyerere says, which enables us to be objective – which could be of great importance to the Commonwealth and, by deduction, the rest of the world. What may appear as one of the most marginalised spaces in the topography of geopolitics may in fact be the Archimedean point from where we can *collectively* obtain leverage on the petty logic of political realism. The pathos aside, it is the tension between the transcendent and the immanent world of the political that is intriguing. Nyerere argues that we have no power, no history of involvement in conflicts, we ‘do not have to think of political prestige’ (1967b: 135–6); we are honest, humble, objective, the humanist force of reconciliation and mediation – in short, *beyond mere politics*. All this is the transcendent claim of humanism, but it is a humanism that can only enter the political on the back of a compromise that turns humanism as mode of critique into *humanism*. In other words, what is most transcendent about humanism – the fact that it beckons to a world ‘beyond’ mere politics – only becomes visible once it is actualised as its opposite: an immanent move wholly within the domain of the political. If, unlike powerful states, ‘we do not have to think of political prestige’, we can nonetheless leverage our humble objectivity, ‘as the only way we can hope to gain any prestige’. Transcendental humanism is converted into political capital in order to do the
dirty work of immanent politics, the kind that will earn it, too, some privilege and prestige.\textsuperscript{20} What is revealed through this sacrificial incarnation (and incarceration) of the transcendental as immanence is the fact that Nyerere does not manage to sneak out the back door of the Fanonian dialectic of freedom. Rather, he doubles up on the idea of a freedom asserted, through the messianic anticipation that Africa in general, perhaps, but certainly Tanganyika in particular, can set the world free. This is Nyerere the realist who truly understood the politics of the gift: one \textit{is dependent} as long as one relies on gifts; one \textit{becomes independent} when one no longer needs them, but one can only \textit{assert independence} when, in turn, one becomes the dispenser of gifts, the giver or gifter, the one who is relied upon and imitated in being.\textsuperscript{21}

Conclusion

In some misguided way, the meta-critique of Ubuntu offered in Part I of this report, specifically the analysis of the conceptual personae through which the meaning and place of Ubuntu in the world is articulated, invites the question, ‘Then who is right – the Prophet, the Conformist, the Cosmopolitan, the Archivist?’ But this is the wrong question for two reasons: First, there is no adjudication possible that will not present itself in the mode of one of these personae (or, admittedly, another one that yet awaits articulation). In the metaphorical language of Dinesen’s story,

\textsuperscript{20} This logic is also evident in in Ubuntu-based management discourses, where ‘the human’ is invoked ‘to effect spiritual reconciliation between the workplace and African beliefs’ (Dandala 2009: 260), or where ‘Ubuntu might be harnessed to soften the hard face of the economy’ (263). This reconciliation aims, not primarily at the spiritual growth of the individual; that is, the realisation of the transcendent potentialities, but at actualising the potential of the immanent, the workplace – the human, not as an end in itself, but as a means to increased productivity for the company and increased power of and profits for corporations: ‘To be seen as vulnerable can be an enhancing factor allowing managers to be seen as people behind the façade of power’ (260). Behind the first façade of power lies the second façade of fake vulnerability as both cultural and economic capital.

\textsuperscript{21} For Thomas Hobbes, pride is such a social construct and the most dangerous of the three causes of war because ‘the criterion of success is universal envy; vainglory cannot be slaked by prosperity, and it creates a competition that security cannot defuse. There logically cannot be more than one top position; if that is what we seek, the conflict between ourselves and others is absolute’ (Ryan 1996: 221).
they are (some of the) tracks made by the searching Ubuntu theorist. This theorist cannot, through an ostensibly detached act of autobiographical reflection as writing, remove him- or herself from the modes of being revealed here in order to decide, once and for all, on the meaning of track-making in a way that will not amount to more track-making, the generation of more and more conceptual personae. Second, if we take as a point of departure the principle or the logic of interdependence – what we generally refer to as African humanism or specifically as Ubuntu – the question of its relative out-of-placeness in an episteme biased in favour of a politics radically at odds with it, these personae present no more than various ways in which to conceive the sacrifice that humanism makes in order to become political, to engage the political. The conceptual personae presented here are nothing more than various political actualisations of the necessary failure of humanism.