Speaking about the struggle for racial equality during a visit to Cape Town in 1966, Robert Kennedy announced that he was there because of his deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage.

He was referring, “of course, to the United States of America.” 1 In outlining the similarities between his own country and South Africa, Kennedy was drawing on a rich transnational history of the fight against racial oppression in both places. In this history, ideas of universal humanity served as a primary tool with which freedom was eventually won. It is not surprising, then, that the fight against racism in post-apartheid South Africa has involved the recuperation of ideas of “humanness,” including the traditional African signifier of humanity, “ubuntu.” This paper argues, however, that in its cooption by the Boston Celtics and the US soccer team, and by multinational conglomerations such as Coca-Cola in the run-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the term “ubuntu” represents a very different confluence of cultural discourses than the “humanness” that Robert Kennedy was referring to half a century ago. “Ubuntu” is now being used as a money-making device, a cultural commodity in the transnational economic circuit of globalized sport, in both the US and South Africa.

Ubuntu, a Bantu-language word that signifies a traditional African quality to aspire to and embody, serves as the spiritual foundation of many African societies. It is a

1 Kennedy, “A Tiny Ripple of Hope.”
unifying vision or worldview contained in the Zulu sayings *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, or “a person is a person through other persons,” and *Bonk’abantu bayadingana*, “everyone needs other people,” which are part of a long cultural tradition that emphasizes interdependence. These proverbs define the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others so that “both the self and others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related.”² The concept appears repeatedly on television, radio, and in official messages in post-apartheid South Africa, serving as a vehicle through which religious and political leaders, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, construct a postcolonial, modern African identity.

In this paper, I argue that in post-apartheid South Africa and the US, local sports teams use *ubuntu* to market themselves to a global arena, in the process buffering fraught social and economic relationships between blacks and whites, unemployed “youth” and the global work force, and between individual nation states and the international community. I refer to these uses of *ubuntu* as “Ubuntu Sports Inc.” to signify the commodification of a traditional African ethical philosophy. This is a trend that confirms Jean and John Comaroffs’ assertion that corporations are commodifying the world’s ethnic identities to open up new markets, and that ethnic populations are also remaking themselves in line with cultural stereotypes for profit.³ Indeed, as I demonstrate, in post-apartheid South Africa and the US *ubuntu* functions as a commodity that sells a trendy raced subject without edge to white consumers, as well as the idea of an unimaginably prosperous, raced subject to disadvantaged, marginalized, and raced urban “youth” all over the world. Last, Ubuntu Sports Inc. is also being used to sell nations as worthy business markets; as evident during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, South Africa used its position as a host of the World Cup to advertise itself as a promising business location in the global economy. Furthermore, in being a symbolic signifier of humanity supposedly grounded in local traditions, *ubuntu* serves as a veil for the global economy’s actual work of alienation and systematic oppression.

In making this argument, I draw on and challenge Pheng Cheah’s contention in *Inhuman Conditions* that human rights discourses such as *ubuntu*, and their vision of the universal “human,” are themselves products of global capital and cannot transcend the subjective, unequal relations between individuals and nations. Cheah therefore argues that the humanities should “question” the idea of the universal human and even “give it up.”⁴ He also challenges the existence of the transcendent “human” by arguing that the terms “dignity,” “freedom,” and “rationality” which constitute the “human” change their meaning according to social, political, and economic contexts and according to the people who have the power to realize them—people who are themselves products of the inequality engendered by global capital. While the ubiquity of Ubuntu Sports Inc. would seem to confirm this

³ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnicity Inc.*
phenomenon, Cheah’s claim that human rights are always already contaminated by global capital disregards the distinction between the core idea of the universal human and what happens to it in real-world instrumental relations, a distinction that human rights instruments struggle to maintain. Indeed, ubuntu’s existence as a regulative ideal in people’s minds is testified to by the positive work the notion has done in post-apartheid South Africa in the arena of racial reconciliation and, even before that, in traditional systems of Zulu democracy. I therefore resist the doing away of universal signifiers such as ubuntu completely; instead, I argue, first, for a historical grounding of the concept, highlighting its genealogy as a Bantu-language political and cultural concept. Second, I provide an in-depth analysis of the ways that capitalist discourses such as Ubuntu Sports Inc. manipulate and misuse this universal signifier for their own ends. In doing so, I hope to render the dilution of the term, and therefore its appropriation for questionable ends, more difficult.

Through a reading of traditional pre-colonial and colonial Zulu phrases, proverbs and riddles, I first lay out how the notions of interdependence and democratic thought central to ubuntu were enacted through very specific social institutions related to the sharing of food. I then explore the transformation of ubuntu into a nationalist and capitalist discourse linked to the development of a global economy of sports. I make this argument by drawing on my findings from a month’s fieldwork in Johannesburg in July 2010, just after the 2010 World Cup ended. During my visit, I interviewed about twenty native speakers of Bantu languages, including Xhosa and Zulu. My interviewees were from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from gardeners, taxi drivers, tour group operators, waiters, and receptionists to graduate students in African literature departments. I asked basic questions about when they had heard the word used last and in what context, as well as what values they associated with the word.

**THE MANY USES AND ABUSES OF UBUNTU**

In post-apartheid South Africa, ubuntu has served as a discourse of racial reconciliation, a narrative that highlights the community over the individual by promoting generosity, one that emphasizes personal enrichment and one that signifies an African identity. It is not surprising, then, that the term has been critiqued for being too generalized and not historically grounded enough, as essentializing and homogenizing South African culture, and as reinstating traditional tribal hierarchies. Nevertheless, in her extensive fieldwork in South Africa, Drucilla Cornell has shown that ubuntu remains essential to how young black teenagers

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5 There have been various critiques of the popular notion of ubuntu. For instance, South African Constitutional Court judge Yvonne Mokgoro has argued that African morality cannot be codified in the way that ubuntu attempts to do and is to be known merely on a “know it when I see it” basis. South African academic Mamphela Ramphele has accused the concept of ubuntu of nativism, arguing that there is nothing about African morality that significantly differs from Western morality. See Mokgoro, “Ubuntu and the Law in South Africa,” and Enslin and Horsthemke, “Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education in African Democracies?”
in South African townships understand and judge themselves as human beings. Given the weight it carries in the South African popular imagination and its multiple appropriations by vested interests, it is important to give the notion historical grounding by tracing the origins of ubuntu in South African culture. I therefore read pre-colonial and colonial Zulu texts to argue that, in Bantu literature and culture, ubuntu referred to notions of interdependence that were enacted through social institutions related to the sharing of food. These functioned as metaphors for the sharing of power, giving rise to a political ubuntu that criticized authoritarian rule in a communal food economy that was intra-tribal and concentrated in the chief. The proverbs and riddles I look at served as self-regulating mechanisms that extended the ubuntu proverb, “a person is a person through other people,” to the lesser known democratic ideal “a chief is a chief through other people.”

The Zulus defined the basic values of humanity through the sharing of food and cattle perhaps because they were traditionally agriculturists. As South African literary scholar Michael Chapman points out, in binding the living to the ancestral dead, land and the cattle and crops it produced provided both physical and sacred roots of existence. The sharing of the fruits of the land therefore served as the basis of the economy but was also an ethical imperative, without which the ancestors could not be happy. As a result, there are countless customs surrounding the concept of ubuntu related to the giving and taking of food. For instance, the word ukuthekela referred to the sharing of one’s crops; ukunana referred to the sharing of one’s household items; and ukusisa referred to the lending of one’s female livestock to a neighbor till it gave birth to calves, which the neighbor would keep, only returning the cow. These systematic institutions of sharing were expressed through Zulu proverbs, izaga, such as “they eat through other men,” which refers to the practice of helping a man to slaughter and skin his beast, and then sharing the meat with him. The idea of sharing food was also captured by proverbs that deal with giving food, particularly to strangers. For instance, phrases such as “the stomach of a stranger is small,” “the stomach of a traveler does not finish anything,” “the mouth does not despise,” and “a beast that is passing finishes no grass” were usually recited by strangers at one’s door asking for a bite to eat, with the tradition being to ply such strangers with food. One reason for this generosity was the custom of reciprocity expressed by proverbs such as “Let the meat gifts cross one another” and “To give is to dish out for oneself (ukuph’ ukuziphakela).” Giving to another, then, metaphorically translated into giving to the self, realizing the idea, central to ubuntu, that “a person is a person through other people.” Giving to another was also considered canny because the expectation was that the same person or their tribe would be able to look after you in return if you traveled their way. The characteristic of not sharing food, meanwhile, was heartily criticized, with izaga speaking of such people as displaying ubuqili or cunning, as in the proverb “he is the crafty one whose locusts are roasted last.” This proverb, referring to the practice of boys roasting and

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6 Cornell, “The Ubuntu Project.”
sharing their locusts over a communal fire, highlights the last roaster as being keen to benefit from the efforts of others while being reluctant to share his own food.\(^8\)

The ideas of interdependence and reciprocity through sharing food that were so central to *ubuntu* also extended to concepts of social organization and property ownership. One nineteenth-century riddle describes the layout of a Zulu village through the metaphor of a pumpkin plant, which was a staple crop in Zulu farming:

Guess a pumpkin-plant; it is single, and has many branches; it may be hundreds; it bears many thousand pumpkins on its branches; if you follow the branches, you will find a pumpkin everywhere; you will find pumpkins everywhere. You cannot count the pumpkins of one branch; you can never die of famine; you can go plucking and eating; and you will not carry food for your journey through being afraid that you will find no food where you are going. No; you can eat and leave, knowing that by following the branches you will continually find another pumpkin in front; and so it comes to pass. Its branches spread out over the whole country, but the plant is one, from which springs many branches. And each man pursues his own branch, and all pluck pumpkins from the branches.\(^9\)

The riddle depicts the pumpkin plant as a village and the pumpkins as its inter-connected, individual homesteads to echo “a person is a person through other people.” The parallelism of the phrase, “you will find a pumpkin everywhere; you will find pumpkins everywhere,” with the repetition only distinguished by the pluralization of “pumpkin” to “pumpkins,” asserts that a single pumpkin found “everywhere” is the same as, or connected to, the many pumpkins found everywhere. One pumpkin is linked to many; therefore one is many, just as a person is a person only because she belongs to a community of many. The singular is only possible through the existence of the plural, and vice versa. Furthermore, in representing the village as a unified whole made up of many homesteads just as a pumpkin plant is “one from which springs many branches,” the riddle also makes an important point about the nature of private property. While each man pursues “his own branch,” or his own village street, this individual ownership is immediately negated by the pluralization of the individual to “all” men, of “branch” to “branches” and of “pumpkin” to “pumpkins.” The individual, then, is inextricable from the community, and so his branch and pumpkin are inseparable from the branches and pumpkins of the rest of the village. The syntax indicates that there is no such thing as individual possession. The point is consolidated by the assertion that, since the pumpkins belong to everybody, the traveler does not have to carry his own food, a significant point for it refers to the practice of sharing food so central to *ubuntu*.

**UBUNTU AND THE SHARING OF CHIEFLY POWER THROUGH FOOD AND CATTLE**

Not only was *ubuntu* about the sharing of food and cattle but also about the organization of political power; as Michael Chapman describes, the chief of the

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\(^8\) Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs*, “Ubuntu.”

village was also the guardian of the communal economy, regulating the way food and cattle circulated to his subjects. As the link to the ancestors, the chief partook in rituals such as the First-fruit Ceremony, which infused the harvest with ancestral blessings. Only after he had done so was the harvest filtered down through the various levels of authority, to tribal chiefs, sub-chiefs, and head-men, and eventually the common farmer and his family. As the guardian of the ancestor’s wishes, a chief who did not fulfill his ethical imperative of ensuring the material prosperity and well-being of his subjects through the sharing of cattle, milk, and harvest was not worthy of rule. The communal economy, then, depended on the chief’s collection and distribution of these items. This was done without the chief formally “owning” any of the items he collected, thereby negating any conception of “private property.” In depending on the goods he received from his people, the organization of the communal food economy effectively literalized the maxim “a chief is a chief through other people.”

This responsibility of sharing food and cattle was also political because it represented the sharing of power with the chief’s subjects. Michael Chapman points out that this metaphoric sharing of power was an extension of the practical system of sharing government. A system of traditional democratic monarchy was conducted by discussion in public meetings open to all adult males, where any man could express criticism of the chief’s behavior, and this system was symbolically buttressed through the ritual distribution of cattle, food, and milk. As Paul K. Bjerk, a historian of the Zulu kingdom, has argued, because the king’s cattle were collected from every homestead in the realm, the king “bound the strength of the entire kingdom unto himself, centralizing and controlling its power.” He then distributed this concentration of power by distributing land and cattle among his subjects and literally letting his warriors drink from the udders of his cows in a controlled manner. Food, then, and milk in particular, was also a metaphor for power and the king’s fitness to rule was judged according to how readily he shared his milk and cattle, and therefore his power, with his subjects. Bjerk quotes one of James Stuart’s informants, Magojela ka Mfanawendhlela, who discussed the eating habits of the chiefly rivals Zungu and Makoba to determine which one should accede to the throne. He notes that “since Makoba ate up all that was put in his hand, whereas Zungu would take one mouthful and throw the rest away, or let the rest fall through his hands on the ground, Makoba was a glutton and would be mean, whereas Zungu would be content with a little and leave some for others; hence it was right he should become the chief despite Makoba’s seniority.” Another chief, Dingane, was described in his praise poem as “the milk bucket which overflows (gaba) without having given birth.”

11 Gluckman, Zulu Ethnography, 75–77.
14 James Stuart was born of British parentage in Pietermaritzburg and learned Zulu from Zulu children. As a civil servant and magistrate in various districts of Zululand between 1888 and 1912, he made an intensive study of Zulu customs, history and oral tradition.
was a vivid praise, as well as a criticism, of the king’s authoritarian power. These kinds of criticism were particularly common during Shaka’s rule, evidenced by the nineteenth-century praise poems, proverbs and folk tales that criticized his authoritarian kingship by focusing on his unwillingness to share food.

POST-APARTHEID **UBUNTU: A NATIONALIST AND CAPITALIST DISCOURSE?**

Contemporary uses of *ubuntu* have undergone much change, reflecting the trauma of apartheid and the arduous process of healing that has followed in popular discourses of racial reconciliation and economic progress for all. However, traces of the old *ubuntu* are still apparent in recurrences of the trope of sharing food in recognition of the humanness of fellow South Africans. For instance, Nelson Mandela recently explained *ubuntu* in these terms: “A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn’t have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him.” This kind of generosity is also referred to by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who defines *ubuntu* thus: “When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu;’ ‘Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.’”

Furthermore, in multiple African cultures, metaphors to do with *ubuntu* and the amounts of food eaten, shared, or stolen still serve as a gauge for the quality of political rule. For instance, the political theorist Jean Francis Bayart demonstrates how the size of the politician’s “belly” functions as a critical metaphor for a nepotistic, corrupt African state in which government and business elite use their influence to enrich themselves, their families, or ethnic kinsmen. Use of such metaphors serves as a popular critical mechanism by which to sanction democratic rule and challenge the misuse of political power. As Achille Mbembe has written,

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15 Bjerk, “They Poured Themselves into the Milk,” 12. Bjerk also notes that the metaphor of pouring milk to represent the transfer of power was particularly used to describe state action. Upon return from a successful battle, ‘the cattle were shared out…they were ‘poured out’ to the ‘amakhanda’ (settlements).’ In binding the youth into the “*amabutho*” (regiments), stationed at various *amakhanda* around the kingdom, Shaka shifted manpower from place to place by “pouring” them into each other. The verb “*tela*” (to pour) or “*telwa*” (to be poured), then, was used by Stuart’s sources to “describe the amalgamating, temporarily or permanently, of *amabutho*.” These institutions were understood quite literally as liquid-bearers of milk. Bjerk, “They Poured Themselves into the Milk,” 9.

16 In 1820–1880, Shaka imposed the institution of kingship and army in Zululand. The kingship concentrated all powers and functions in the king, and the army (now based on age sets rather than on territorial or tribal units), subordinated all affiliations to the national affiliation centered in the king. As Trevor Cope points out, Shaka’s rule replaced the values of reciprocity and diplomacy with the ideal of dominance, in which the values of forcefulness and fearlessness, martial power, and national glory played the most important part, together with the values of good order, respect for authority, and obedience to discipline. Stuart *et al.*, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 22.


19 Bayart, *The State in Africa*. 

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“non official cultures are in fact intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which these systems are confirmed or deconstructed” and the belly is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power... the obesity of men in power, their impressive physique or, more crudely, the flow of shit which results from such a physique—these appeal to a people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter... They thus become part of a system of signs that the commandement leaves, like tracks, as it passes on its way, and so make it possible for someone to follow the trail of violence and domination that is intrinsic to the commandement.20

A political vocabulary of critique, replete with eating metaphors, still exists in the common idioms of politicized subjects in Africa. Furthermore, from some of my interviews it also became apparent that, in the rural areas, ubuntu still has a lot to do with the formation of communal food economies that represent a democratic form of rule between a “chief” and his subjects. For instance, a middle-aged Xhosa gardener in Johannesburg, originally from a village in the Eastern Cape, described ubuntu as integral to a system of electing a “small chief” in his village:

The people choose someone with ubuntu. Who is not selfish. If he changes his behavior, we remove him and choose someone else unless he apologizes. You can criticize him if you don’t like something he does, you can call him and sit down with him. He is not allowed to work since his primary work is to serve his people, so we pool our money and our cows and goats and bring them to him. But if you cannot afford to give him anything, that is okay too. A chief with ubuntu should never ask for anything. He should just take what he is given. We say to him “don’t treat people badly just because you are a chief, don’t sell land to them. Because we make you responsible for the whole village, you are just supposed to give it to us. Don’t take money from people who cannot afford to give you anything.” If our boys are fighting we take him to the chief, not to the police and he decides whether they have to go to the police or not. This small chief is our real government, not the local government.

This fascinating oral history, occasioned by my questions about ubuntu, testifies to the survival of traditional democracies and communal economies in rural areas based on the informal systems of giving and taking that define ubuntu. Nevertheless, not surprisingly in Johannesburg, the association of the word “ubuntu” with the sanctioning of certain kinds of democratic rule or with its delegitimizing critique was rare. What became increasingly clear was that the notion has undergone much transformation in its cooption by nationalist discourses of racial reconciliation.

The majority of the people I interviewed, including the Xhosa gardener above, also tied ubuntu to ideas of racial and national reconciliation. He said “we used to think white man have no ubuntu. So we used to steal cattle from white people and kill their livestock and fight them with assegais. Those times had no ubuntu.” About a third of my interviewees remembered it used in the context of the May 2008 xenophobic

attacks on African immigrants in South Africa. These usages of the word make more sense once one considers contemporary official discourses of ubuntu. In 2008, Archbishop Desmond Tutu described a person with ubuntu as open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

The last sentences clearly refer to the way black people were treated during apartheid, and calls for a new society in which all races live together constructively.

This marriage of ubuntu with racial reconciliation is perhaps best reflected in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull, a fictional yet journalistic memoir interested in ubuntu’s role within the TRC, interprets the concept almost completely through the lens of racial reconciliation. Krog draws on contemporary South African thinkers such as Jabu Sindane and Willie van der Merwe to declare that we should encounter the difference of people’s humanness so as to inform and enrich our own. Through the lens of her narrative, the Zulu umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu translates as “To be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form.” The respect for the particularities of the beliefs and practices of others is especially emphasized by a striking, yet lesser-known translation of umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: “A human being is a human being through (the otherness of) other human beings.” For post-apartheid South Africans of all colors and cultures, ubuntu dictates that, if we want to be human, we need to recognize the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens. Since the individual or self cannot be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other, diversity is essential to community. When diversity is not respected, as under apartheid, two hostile worlds are created instead of one. Krog describes her experiences of these separated worlds:

I’m visiting a friend in town. In their backyard lives a maid. “Doesn’t she miss her children?” I ask. “Maids don’t feel like other people about their children. They like to be rid of them.” On a previous visit “Why doesn’t she have a heater?” “Maids don’t get cold like white people. The reason she stinks – they don’t like washing.”

She calls these assumptions a “series of comforting delusions” that allow people to accommodate two worlds. Instead, this discourse of ubuntu recognizes the common humanity of everyone so that differences simply serve as interesting features from which everyone can learn and with which community can be enriched. Thus Krog tries to describe a space that recognizes all South Africans as part of the same national

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21 Between 2000 and March 2008 at least 67 people died in what were identified as xenophobic attacks. In May 2008 a series of riots left another 62 people dead; although 21 of those killed were South African citizens.

22 Sindane, Ubuntu and Nation Building, 8–9; Krog, Country of my Skull.


24 Ibid.

25 Krog, Country of my Skull, 250.
community regardless of their race. The narrative voice of the protagonist, the journalist covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, pleads:

God. Does he hear us? Does he know what our hearts are yearning for? That we all just want to be human—some with some colour, some with less, but all with air and sun. And I wade into song—in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know. It is fragrant inside the song, and among the keynotes of sorrow and suffering, there are soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest. Sometimes the times we live in overflow with light. 26

Krog expresses the common humanity of South Africans by referring to the absolutes they all hold in common: “all with air and sun.” Although she learns about her country “in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know,” “it is fragrant inside the song” because there is a space outside language which belongs to all of them, and it is in these “soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest.” The emphasis on “all of us” through its separation from the rest of the sentence by commas enforces the universality of people’s rights as South Africans. This is obviously an overwhelmingly positive experience, described as “overflowing with light.” Krog turns a community out of different people, all South Africans, all humans. In Krog’s narrative, then, ubuntu is defined solely through narratives of nationhood and the questions about “humanness” thrown up by perverted race relations.

Similarly, the appropriation of ubuntu as a vehicle of racial reconciliation is apparent in the marketing blurb of the Ubuntu Sports Outreach program in Cape Town, which aims to find professional employment in soccer for disadvantaged unemployed youth. The organization’s logo features black and white hands clasped together in a symbol of victory, with heavenly rays of light emanating from such a union: see Figure 1. Soccer, here, is uplifted as a vehicle for a humanity that does

Figure 1. Logo of the Ubuntu Sports Outreach program

Source: Used with permission from Ubuntu Sports Outreach: www.ubuntusports.org

26 Ibid., 285.
not differentiate according to race or social standing. Furthermore, the heavenly rays of light turn it into a transcendent discourse sanctioned by God. In the remainder of this essay, I argue that while this discourse of ubuntu has done valuable work toward reconciliation in the post-apartheid context, it has also diluted the concept to the extent that it has been amenable to appropriation by Ubuntu Sports Inc. in South Africa and the US.

**Ubuntu as a Discourse of Racial Reconciliation at the Service of Global Sports**

The use of “ubuntu” as a team slogan and rallying cry by US sports teams such as the NBA’s Boston Celtics (2008) and the US soccer team during the 2010 FIFA World Cup relies on a carefully crafted simultaneous avowal and disavowal of race aimed at selling a trendy raced subject without edge to white and black consumers both in post-apartheid South Africa and the US. In an age of transnational capital marked by the globalization of sport, the athletic subject must signify his/her raced particularity as a profit-making strategy while negating its threat to white privilege. This is, as Grant Farred has argued, what Michael Jordan did when he “transcended” race to sell himself as a sports icon to adoring fans all over the world:

Jordan was the athlete who singlehandedly changed the way capital and sport interact. Over the course of some two decades, Jordan was the pivotal figure in a triangulated commercial marriage composed of the NBA, the media, and his own iconic presence, that spawned millions of dollars for all concerned. Basketball quickly became one of the most lucrative sports in the world, making billions of dollars every year for franchises, players, coaches, media networks, advertisers, and sponsors from Beijing to Barcelona to Buenos Aires.27

Despite this attempted transcendence of race through a Jordanesque discourse of post-racialism, however, “race,” according to Farred emerged as a “phantom,” “the unspeakable aspect of the political that is feared because of its capacity to disrupt the ‘normal’ functioning of a society because its presence not only haunts the body politic, but is palpably present even when its disorderly propensities are not at work.”28 Indeed, in the post-Jordan NBA, race comes up in unavoidable ways, given the majority black sports teams and their largely white administration and audience. I argue that this phantom is suppressed by Ubuntu Sports Inc. in South Africa and the US, both of which regularly grapple with the socio-economic and cultural legacies of their histories of racial oppression.

In the US, the use of Ubuntu Sports Inc. inverts the negative stereotype of the aggressive, rambunctious, trash-talking black players by marking the athletes as raced but culturally respectable, creating a globally marketable or cosmopolitan blackness through a superficial recalling of the African origins of African Americans. The use of Ubuntu Sports Inc. as a metaphor for “team playing” and good behavior decontextualizes the term, robbing it of its marking of historical oppression and the

28 Farred, *Phantom Calls*, 12.
overcoming of it; indeed, on the basketball court socio-economic and racial realities do not matter. “Playing as a team” on the basketball court becomes a metaphor for social harmony off it. For instance, the Boston Celtics employed *ubuntu* as their rallying cry simply because their coach Doc Rivers wanted to manage the egos of the ‘Elite Three’, the Celtics’ lead players Garnett, Pierce, and Allen, and get them to work together with the whole team. This message is clear in Figure 2’s depiction of the action on the basketball court.

![Figure 2](www.celtics.com)

**Figure 2. Image from Boston Celtics’ website**

*Source: www.celtics.com*

This image depicts a slow-motion action replay, except that, instead of there being a repetition of one individual, there are five members of the team carrying out different aspects of a shot that would usually be pictured as the result of one player’s actions. In the image, one player bounces the ball part way across the court, the other takes it to the basket, another makes the leap under the basket, yet another dunks it, and the last catches the ball on its way down from the basket. The implications are clear; the shot and its success belongs to all of them, not to one player alone. Furthermore, all are simply aspects of one another, working together to achieve success. From bouncing the ball toward the hoop, to leaping up to it, to dunking it through the hoop, and then finally catching it on the rebound, all are one seamless action. Similarly, the facial expressions depicted convey one
emotion of concentration and determination although they appear on five different faces.

This transformation of ubuntu’s message of social and racial reconciliation into a signifier of team playing is perhaps best demonstrated by the words of the Ubuntu Sports Outreach program in Cape Town whose website states:

Ubuntu (oo-boon-too) is an African expression of togetherness. It means that what I am is intrinsically linked to and part of what we are. Nowhere is this idea of human synergy more perfectly expressed than on a sports field where a group of individuals together rise or fall depending on the presence or absence of that intangible alchemy, melding individuals into one seamless unit. Ubuntu.29

The sports field, then, is not only a place where racial and social tensions become inconsequential, but one where the individual and community become inseparable from one another on the basis of how well they play together. The sports field becomes a metaphor for social harmony, a place where individuals rise and fall together. As one American sports commentator noted in 2008,

When I saw the Boston Celtics play the Cleveland Cavaliers in the last preseason game, the thing that struck me most was how cohesive a unit they were. Many pundits, and NBA observers worried that “The Elite Three” would eventually start bickering, wanting more of the spotlight. What those folks failed to realize was all three of these players had enough personal recognition, they hungered for one thing, that Championship Ring. Sunday’s game against the Atlanta Hawks was a perfect example of Ubuntu, there were no stand out performances, just a bunch of very good ones. If they keep following the concepts of Ubuntu, Boston Celtics fans may be raising a new banner on Opening Night of next season.30

The words “these players had enough personal recognition, they hungered for one thing, that Championship Ring” demonstrates that Ubuntu Sports Inc. is simply a vehicle towards personal enrichment. The sports commentator emphasizes that the team victory that results in this personal enhancement is achieved deliberately through “no stand out performances, just a bunch of very good ones.” This narrative conflates traditional notions of ubuntu, which is a communal philosophy, with a glorification of the individual, thereby negating it. The players are playing together not for the sake of it, but for the sake of the championship ring (Figures 3a and 3b). The word “ubuntu” engraved on the championship ring serves as an apt symbol of Ubuntu Sports Inc. It appears at the bottom of a ring studded with diamonds and emeralds, crafted in white gold. This ironic use of ubuntu as Ubuntu Sports Inc. is a narrative spun out of ideas of personal enrichment and symbolized by the flashy excess of the ring.

A similar strategy is used to sell global sports to disadvantaged youth. I use “youth” here in the sense that South African anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff define it, referring not simply to “teenagers” but to marginalized youth, mostly racial minorities who live at the borders of respectable society in cities all over the world. Their troubling presence is caused by the skewed nature of the global economy and the “inability of governments to subject the workings of international capital to their own rules and regulations” so that a huge proportion are idle and unemployed. The discourse of Ubuntu Sports Inc., symbolized by the ring above, aims at precisely this population demographic, serving as a “feel-good” tool. Its emphasis on teamwork makes youth feel as if they are part of a community while simultaneously making them forget about their marginalization in a hostile society. Ubuntu Sports Inc., then, is a cathartic vent for negative energy; the Celtics call “ubuntu” their “rallying battle cry” and for the youthful fans who take part in it, crying “ubuntu” channels their rage and idle energy into the emotion of “being in it together” and conquering odds in the way the Boston Celtics do on the court. The game serves as a metaphor for the game of their life, and the Celtics’ victory represents their victory. Ubuntu Sports Inc., then, simultaneously assures these youth that they will be able to rise above the rest of the community through the opportunities that sports will provide them. In this vein, the blog “Slam Dunk Central” talks about the big man phenomenon in American basketball:

Let’s track the evolution of a NBA player. He starts out as the best player in the neighborhood, then the best in his junior league, eventually he becomes the best player on his high school team, is recruited by top colleges, and becomes the go  

to guy on his team. Meanwhile, he has the hottest girlfriend, he is big man on campus, and people give him things.  

Once again, then, the highlighting of the community in traditional notions of *ubuntu* actually translates into a glorification of the individual in Ubuntu Sports Inc.

The use of *ubuntu* as a convenient platitude to appeal to urban youth in attempts to smooth over racial and economic divisions is well exemplified in post-apartheid South Africa by the Ubuntu Sports Outreach program mentioned earlier, which describes its “unique mission” to offer high-level soccer coaching in the southern townships of Cape Town, South Africa “as they prepare to host the 2010 World Cup:

> Our premise is that amongst boys and young men who love soccer, there is no better context for building relationships, earning their trust and sharing the good news of their Saviour. It is our belief and experience that meeting young men in a shared passion is often the very best way to open doors and hearts for the Great Passion to be shared—our love for Jesus and His love for them. We also know that this is an era where excellence in sport can open remarkable doors for education and employment in the professional game. Professional clubs in developed nations are making significant investment in boys as young as 8 and 9 years old because they recognize significant value in their footballing potential. That same value lies largely untapped in Africa.

The program equates *ubuntu* with a transcendent Christian godliness, marking soccer out as the path to Jesus. The mention of “opening remarkable doors for education and employment” suggests that soccer stardom will enable a way out of poverty for those who are supposedly equal under God. The realities of race are not spoken here. The organization simply presents urban black youth with a way into the global workforce by producing the myth that they matter, that there is not only a place in the national community for them, but an opportunity for privilege and status.

**Ubuntu Sports Inc. and the Nation State in a Global Economy**

The harnessing of Ubuntu Sports Inc. is also used to mediate the relationship between individual nation states and the global economy. This was perhaps most evident in the popular culture surrounding the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The majority of the people I interviewed in Johannesburg had been told, on radio shows, television, advertisements, and in official announcements, to treat foreign tourists with “*ubuntu*” in the run-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup. During this time, *ubuntu* was used to remind South Africans not to turn foreign visitors into targets of crime since they were bringing global capital to the local economy. These sentiments were repeatedly enforced by public figures such as Phil “Chippa” Masinga, 2010 World Cup ambassador, who expressed the fear that the violence may scuttle the World Cup.

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altogether: “People from outside the country will not want to come and attend these tournaments to avoid possible attacks on them.” Majimbos coach Teboho “Tebza Ngwana” Moloi added that such violence would not “be good for us as Africans. We black South Africans were taught about the spirit of ubuntu when we grew up. The African brothers and sisters should be accommodative to each other.”

This conflation of discourses of racial reconciliation and global capital through Ubuntu Sports Inc. was also apparent from the images I spotted on the backs and sides of buses all over Johannesburg (depicted in Figure 4). In the advertisement shown, Coca-Cola, one of the major official sponsors of the FIFA World Cup, becomes a vehicle of “ubuntu” through the tournament. As the advertising slogans suggest, drinking Coca-Cola is to “open happiness” by opening oneself to the spirit of ubuntu. The ubuntu logo in the first image depicts people of all colors of the rainbow, thereby symbolizing Mandela’s concept of the rainbow nation, holding hands while standing around a football. The logo suggests that opening a coke bottle while watching the World Cup unites people of all races by imbuing them with the spirit of ubuntu.

Figure 4. Coca-Cola advert displayed on Johannesburg buses during 2010 World Cup (photo taken by author, July 2010)

The problem with messages such as Coca-Cola’s and the soccer stars’ were raised by a prominent newspaper, which pointed out that “it sounds somewhat superficial to ask ubuntu from the poor, when the only ubuntu they see exists among South Africa’s post-apartheid elite. It’s an elite that demands they silently accept the demolition of their communities for the good of both the country as well as the World Cup.” Similarly, Le Monde Diplomatique wrote in May 2010 about the World Cup preparations that “construction—and corruption—is booming. But almost none of the buildings or the money can be accessed by the poor who

live in shantytowns without proper water, sanitation or electricity.” Another article points out the “$9.5 billion in state deficit spending” or about $200 per citizen for a series of policies that the citizens of this proud nation would never have accepted if not wrapped in the honor of hosting the cup. Meanwhile, housing prices in the twenty-first century have gone up 92 percent, while wages have risen a mere 8 percent. . . . This World Cup is not for the poor—it is the soccer elites of FIFA, the elites of domestic and international corporate capital and the political elites who are making billions and who will be benefiting at the expense of the poor.

South African author R.W. Johnson adds that the “extraordinary concentrations of wealth and power” in the hands of a few even resulted in local schools for the raced poor being taken over to be used for stadium facilities. Furthermore, plans that the matches originally be held in a black or coloured area, both in order to encourage investment and jobs and to make it easier for the poor to attend matches, were abandoned for the sake of the “fine mountain views” of white areas. As these national critics point out, Ubuntu Sports Inc. works to privilege South Africa’s economic relationship with the international community at the expense of the disadvantaged raced consumers of products such as Coca-Cola.

Not only is the creation of profitable economic ties between a country and the international community often achieved on the backs of the disadvantaged but through the articulation of a transnational unity that overlooks significant markers of historical racial and economic differences. This was apparent in both South Africa and the US during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The US soccer team, for instance, used Ubuntu Sports Inc. to articulate a transnational unity through their popular lapel pin, shown in Figure 5. The pin unites the USA and South Africa here under the common banner of soccer. This is reflected by the organization of the flags next to each other, with the US soccer team’s logo embossed over, and in the middle of, the flags. While this show of transnational solidarity becomes a way of advertising the nation as a market, or a place to come and do business, it also has the effect of reducing two complex nations with their own distinctive histories into one colorful logo. This attitude of seeing history as a shiny, consumable commodity is perhaps best displayed by the pre-game words of Doc Rivers, the coach of the Boston Celtics, and the brain behind the use of ubuntu as a team slogan:

What did the guy from South Africa say about adversity? All right. He says, nothing can get you down! OK . . . this is what we’re talking about. Adversity . . . You overcome it. We’re the better team . . . we overcome it, all right? Nothing stops us . . . that’s why we play twelve guys. Now let’s beat this team! 

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39 Doc Rivers quoted in Martha Bebinger, Ubuntu, Ubuntu, Ubuntu on WBUR 90.9FM, 10 June 2008, http://www.wbur.org/2008/06/10/ubuntu-ubuntu-ubuntu
The words, “the guy from South Africa,” presumably referring to Nelson Mandela’s struggle against the apartheid movement, reduces one of the toughest resistance fights in the history of the world to nothing more than the “adversity” of a tough game. His words demonstrate no understanding of historical context, and like other uses of Ubuntu Sports Inc., result in a whitewashing of actual socio-economic problems and race relations in South Africa and the US.

Figure 5. US soccer team lapel pin

As these advertisements, popular blogs, and sports merchandise show, Ubuntu Sports Inc. represses the socio-historical causes of fraught race relations, disingenuously propagates ideas of personal enrichment to global “youth,” creates superficial transnational ties based on global capital, and commodifies history into fashionable and consumable catchphrases. In doing so, Ubuntu Sports Inc. highlights the ways in which ideas of the “human” are misused or appropriated to serve the ends of new economic orders and power hierarchies. From the US to South Africa, the world of global sports uses ideas of the human as a veil for the actual work of alienation the global economy does, reducing Robert Kennedy’s marking of specific historic struggles against racism and economic oppression to nothing more than a tough basketball game. On the other hand, a historical grounding of the concept reveals a rich system of linguistic and cultural exchanges apparent in proverbs such as “a chief is a chief through other people.” In tracing the genealogy of the term ubuntu to a dense, socio-political, Bantu vocabulary of democratic critique and interdependence, I hope to have responded to critiques of the term itself as too generalizing, homogenizing, and essentializing of African culture. Furthermore, by then contrasting this ubuntu with the ways that the term is currently being misused for the ends of global capital, I hope to have made ubuntu’s appropriation for
questionable ends more difficult, demonstrating that Ubuntu Sports Inc. is not ubuntu.

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