

## Ubuntu: An African contribution to (re)search for/with a ‘humble togetherness’

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### Abstract

This article is a discussion in two parts. The first part addresses the Southern African indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu, providing it with a working definition and situating it within African epistemology and the socio-political contexts of its invocation. It raises critical concerns about Ubuntu’s embrace in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its promulgation as an ideology within the nation-building project of post-apartheid South Africa. Such concerns are referenced with respect to Ubuntu’s formulation within the advocacies of cultural nationalism. Nevertheless, the discussion commits to perspectives of possibility towards disrupting neoliberalism and decolonizing hegemonic meanings, and advances a debate towards transformation and transcendence within a post-apartheid context.

The second part follows on from the arguments in the first part, which set the stage for a narrative journeying of a more personal nature. It offers a reflexive account of how Ubuntu was used as a guiding principle for engagement in fieldwork and the structuring of a qualitative research methodology. The narrative tone is somewhat different to that of the first part, which offers critical perspectives within a broad socio-political discussion. The second part moves from a national level to a local level. It locates more personal interactions and a search for a ‘humble togetherness’ within the context of a township school in South Africa. The article closes with a somewhat cautionary note on how a philosophy such as Ubuntu might be taken up in a political institutional forum that has unwanted implications, but it also advocates for Ubuntu in providing legitimizing spaces for transcendence of injustice and a more democratic, egalitarian and ethical engagement of human beings in relationship with each other. In this sense, Ubuntu offers hope and possibility in its contribution to human rights.

### Introduction

Along with the ethical turn in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), education and social science studies in general, there has been an increase in awareness and sensitivity to indigenous perspectives as a contested philosophical and ideological terrain of encounter. Post-modernity and post-colonial discourses have afforded new insights and recognition into how the interrelated concepts of identity, ideology, knowledge and context operate discursively and subjectively to construct and position indigenous

*Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 2007, 2(2), pp. 53-67.

ISSN 1718-4770 © 2007 University of Alberta

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE>

peoples and ‘indigenous ways of knowing’ in particular ways that are invested in power. While postmodern discourses assist in disrupting authorized knowledge, entrenched meanings and contextual limitations, creating fragmentation and contingency within shifting perspectives, so post-colonialism along with post-modern advocacies provide avenues for resistance to hegemony and oppression. Rather than foreclosing ‘the knowable’ on marginalized peoples, as was the truth-making mandate of the modernist project, post-modernity and post-colonialism have prized open spaces of possibility for troubling and challenging colonized meanings. These discourses have also raised consciousness of indigeneity beyond mere ‘validation’ to issues of ‘contribution’ as referenced by shifting insider and outsider, and local and global, discourses.

The politics of post-colonial identities in the African context is an ongoing project in which Africa, its diaspora and African epistemologies are articulated and given contested presence (Werbner & Ranger, 1996). African epistemology has been understood, looked to, drawn on, appropriated, colonized and commodified in various ways and from different ideological and critical standpoints, and it is a difficult task to provide historiographical authenticity and ideological affirmation without essentialisms, instrumentalisms and universalisms becoming the modes of discourse production. Nevertheless, rather than avoid engagement with what is potentially a minefield of misinterpretations, I offer some dialogical perspectives on the African epistemology of Ubuntu as an ongoing search and personal journey that affords multiple and shifting insights and contributions to research relationships, education, socio-political discourses, as well as perspectives on more sustainable and democratic human relations in general. I recognize that this is a somewhat problematic and daunting task, but in commitment to the projects of counter-hegemony and egalitarianism, and the search for a new ethic of engagement, I offer some openings to reflective / reflexive moments of this personal narratized journeying in this chapter. Like Derrida’s ghosts (1994), so those ancestral and living spirits of Africa suffering under oppression and colonization, or the victims of dogma, haunt our motives and efforts towards social justice and decolonization. Like Derrida’s ghosts and shadows they are both present and absent at the same time, and their spectral existence is ever present in our discourses and assertions. Ever aware of these dangers, I hope I will do justice to the decolonizing project through the articulation of this discursive journey.

This chapter, therefore, proceeds in two parts. Discussions in Part I offer a broader debate about Ubuntu as a contribution to African epistemology, the way it has been taken up in the post-apartheid South African context, addressing its ideological implications with reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and nation-building. Part I is organized in the following way:

*Ubuntu: A philosophy of becoming human;*  
*African epistemology in the South African and African political context;*  
*Ubuntu, Tutu, and possibilities for Africa;*  
*Ubuntu, the TRC and cultural nationalism;*

This section leads into a discussion about the use of Ubuntu as a guiding principle in qualitative research and fieldwork engagement. It offers a reflexive narrative journeying that seeks opportunities for less objectifying ways of being in relationship

with Others in research contexts, offering insights for qualitative research methodology, education and egalitarianism. Part II is organized in the following way:

*A personal journey;*  
*The journey continues;*  
*The narrative in context;*  
*The narrative excerpt;*  
*In closing.*

## **Part I**

### *Ubuntu: A philosophy of becoming human*

Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa. It comes from Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu; a person is a person through their relationship to others. Ubuntu is recognized as the African philosophy of humanism, linking the individual to the collective through ‘brotherhood’ or ‘sisterhood’. It makes a fundamental contribution to indigenous ‘ways of knowing and being’. With differing historical emphasis and (re)contextualization over time and place, it is considered a spiritual way of being in the broader socio-political context of Southern Africa. This approach is not only an expression of a spiritual philosophy in its theological and theoretical sense, but as an expression of daily living. That is, a way of knowing that fosters a journey towards ‘becoming human’ (Vanier, 1998) or ‘which renders us human’ (Tutu, 1999), or, in its collectivist sense, a greater humanity that transcends alterity of any form.

Nobel Prize laureate, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, who, in 1995, became the chairman of post-apartheid South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was a strong advocate of the philosophy and spiritual power of Ubuntu in the recovery of “truth” through narratives of atrocities from the apartheid era. He also viewed it as necessary in the more important and subsequent processes of forgiveness, reconciliation, transcendence and healing that arise through the cathartic process of truth-telling. In this sense, the extension of notions of ‘truth’ in respect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s mandate exceeded a forensic notion of ‘truth-finding’ to include three others of truth-seeking that encompassed personal or narrative truth, social or dialogic truth, and healing or restorative truth (Marx, 2002, p. 51). A sense of African epistemology resounds through these postulations of ‘truth’ in their formulation and exposition. As a philosophical thread of African epistemology, Ubuntu focuses on human relations, attending to the moral and spiritual consciousnesses of what it means to be human and to be in relationship with an-Other. This is voiced in the (TRC) Commission’s announcement that “It shift the primary focus of crime from the breaking of laws or offences against a faceless state to a perception of crime as violations against human beings, as injury or wrong done to another person” (In Marx, 2002, p.51). Again, the TRC’s imperative of truth-seeking is underscored by a conception of African epistemology and Ubuntu in its incorporation of personal or narrative truth, social or dialogic truth, and healing or restorative truth.

As I have grown to understand the concept, Ubuntu is borne out of the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, and that dignity and identity are

achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment. The adage that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is aligned with the spirit and intent of Ubuntu. Just as apartheid threatened to erode this traditional African way of being – although in some instances it ironically strengthened it through galvanizing collectivist support and creating solidarity amongst the oppressed - so increasing industrialization, urbanization and globalization, threatens to do the same.

*African epistemology in the South African and African political context*

Some Africans and Africanists, often through the ethnophilosophic, negritude and “black consciousness” movements (Bell, 2002), have attempted to universalize African epistemology and provide it with dichotomous distinction from Western thought. While distinctiveness arguably may be of critical necessity, given the ongoing colonisation of African people and the diaspora, and the appropriation of their knowledge and cultures, this has been critiqued as a somewhat problematic project in that it often tends to deny the irrevocable influence of different indigenous and Western epistemologies on each other as recontextualized within different situations and places, often lending an air of romantic essentialism to these efforts. Nevertheless, many have noted, (while achieving differential success at maintaining critical pluralistic perspectives on Africa), that African ways of knowing tend to be enacted and conceptualized as circular, organic and collectivist, rather than linear, unitized, materialistic and individualistic, as is attributed to Western perspectives. Traditional African thought in its various enacted forms is said to seek interpretation, expression, understanding, and moral and social harmony, rather than being preoccupied with verification, rationalism, prediction and control, as reified through Western Scientific norms (Asante, 1987; Bell, 2002; Ramose, 1998; Watkins, 1993). In this sense, and most often vocalized in resistance to colonizing capitalism, a more communalist / communitarian philosophy and way of being has been espoused as appropriately in alignment with African worldviews and ways of being (Bell, 2002; Nkrumah, 1966; Nyerere, 1968; Oruka, 1990; Senghor, 1961; Serequeberhan, 1991; Tutu, 1999). However, this has not been without troubling a notion of ‘community’ in the African sense in a global modernistic context, at least for some (Masolo, 1998). Within such a collectivist philosophy, the affective, relational and moral philosophical tenets are fore-fronted and, in the context of post-colonization, the source of much African epistemological self-consciousness.

As post-apartheid South Africa has emerged out of isolation from the world after a protracted period of international sanctions during apartheid, there has been an increasing trend in the last decade towards neoliberalism as it embraced global capitalism in an attempt to become competitive on the global stage (Adam, van Zyl Slabbert & Moodley, 1998). This has resulted in the rise of a new bourgeois elite, colloquially referred to as the Amabenzi, while significant discrepancies in wealth in South African society remain, even if the reconfiguration of wealth according to race (but class less so) has, to some extent, changed. Some of the previous leaders of the liberation struggle - now amongst the current political leadership in the ANC (African National Congress) have expressed concern, often ironically, about the new elite’s preoccupation with self enrichment and aggrandizement rather than the pursuit of democratic ideals as espoused in much of the discourse of the anti-apartheid movement. The noted detachment of many

of the new elite from the issues of poverty and lack of access to resources still facing their brothers and sisters, (who constitute the majority of South Africans), threatens the unity and commitment of Ubuntu amongst indigenous peoples. This spoken-of lack of political will and loss of rootedness to the issues facing their impoverished brethren, from those privileged by the new configuration of capital, undermines any attempt at significant social and socio-economic reconstruction.

Nevertheless, there is a consciousness and collective desire, through what is often referred to, most especially by South Africa's contemporary State President, Thabo Mbeki, as an African Renaissance, to reincorporate and strengthen African epistemology and Ubuntu within an African post-colonial/post-apartheid era. While Stemplau (1999) discusses the (un)likelihood of such a renaissance occurring, and others have critiqued it for its utopianism, romantic triumphalism, and the rhetorical touchstone of Mbeki's presidency (Farred, 2003), Africa and its issues have gained increasing world focus, as has the recent move towards the creation of African unity and self-determination through the African Union (previously The Organization of African Unity, OAU); The New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD; The Organization of African Trade Union Unity, OATUU, and similar Pan-Africanist organizations.

Autonomy and decolonization are hugely difficult tasks in the African context. This is as a consequence of the entrenched exploitation of Africa through networks of global trade and power. It is also made difficult by the dehistoricized and continued stereotypical objectifying images of an African dystopia that project rampant poverty, corruption and conflict. The decolonizing tasks are often perceived as devoid of hope from Western standpoints. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there have been many successes that have rendered spaces of recognition and possibility for Africans against further exploitation and oppression (Mbeki, 1998), whether these efforts have been granted credence by leading nations and the international media, or not.

In fact, Kofi Anan, former Secretary-General to the United Nations, espoused a tri-epoch conception of Africa post independence, the first two being decolonization, followed by civil war and the "Age of Authoritarianism." For Anan, the "third wave", as a historical moment, is one which is marked by a wary optimism. It is this wave that we are purportedly now riding within the context of a pluralistic and fragmented postmodern / postcolonial era – one connoted by a resurgent transnationalism, an asserted Africanist "rebirth" and Afri-centricity, and an uneven "Death of Authoritarianism" (Farred, 2003). It is a paradigm through which Mbeki's African Renaissance is given ideological voice. Mbeki's growing profile as an important African leader, (except for, example, his unpopular stance over the HIV/AIDS debacle in South Africa and his initial reticence to endorse the anti-retroviral drugs and make them available to those most vulnerable), has arguably afforded Africa and African perspectives some voice in the international arena. Africa has even been granted some place on the global agenda in terms of poverty alleviation and conflict resolution as a result of Mbeki's advocacy through NEPAD. In 2007, South Africa was elected as a regional representative of the United Nation's Security Council, the first time for this African country. Despite the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaging the sub-continent, it is within this context of a new mood of hopefulness, cautious recognition, and guarded optimism, that Ubuntu finds its political presence within the Southern African context, (Zimbabwe notably exempt from this relatively upbeat assessment).

*Ubuntu, Tutu, and possibilities for (South) Africa*

In returning to a notion of Ubuntu, it is necessary to attempt to provide it with an extended working definition and contextualization in order to advance an argument for its purpose and place. Some slogans that have caught on in providing a Westernized interpretation of Ubuntu have been: 'living in each others spirits' and 'I am because we are'. In my own research writing (Swanson 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b) I have couched it in terms of a 'humble togetherness.' Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it theologically as an organic relationship between people everywhere such that when people see others they should recognize themselves and, in Tutu's terms, the God in whose image all people are made. In his autobiographical exposition of his experiences in *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Tutu (1999) explains it in the terms:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "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." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share." A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

In respect of education of youth, Archbishop Tutu urges us to go forth and educate young people into having critical, questioning minds always ready to ask awkward questions, knowing the difference between 'authoritative' and 'authoritarian'. Freedom, he explains, requires eternal vigilance, held accountable by a critical, questioning populace and those who respond to what he refers to as a 'high calling' that would educate and nurture a new generation of human beings that would respond to a sense of conscience, and display generosity of spirit, compassion and care (Battle, 1997; Krog, 1998; Tutu, 1999). Tutu, in his address at the assembly of the World Council of Churches notes that: "We cannot win a so-called war against terror as long as there are conditions of poverty and squalor, ignorance and disease that make God's children, members of our family, desperate" (Christian World Service, 2006). A notion of 'humble togetherness' or Ubuntu in facing the shared responsibility of world poverty, may go a long way to addressing these problems, and provide alternatives to the way governments act in response to 'threat' and 'fear', and to the perceived need to protect their own interests. While such an approach may seem somewhat utopian to some, there is, nevertheless, sufficient urgency to the issues of poverty and oppression that militate against any successful move towards ecological and political sustainability on a planet that is increasingly under environmental threat. It is in the recognition that social, political and environmental concerns are all interrelated, that indigenous perspectives in

general, and Ubuntu, specifically, may be granted place and voice.

Nevertheless, it is important not to advocate for Ubuntu uncritically, as it is in the recontextualisation of the philosophical ideas and their ideological take up, within the parameters of power and context, that distortion, myths and misappropriation occurs. I, therefore, introduce a critique of Christopher Marx of Ubuntu as taken up in the TRC and current post-apartheid South African political advocacies.

### *Ubuntu, the TRC and cultural nationalism*

Marx (2002), in no uncertain terms, criticizes the way in which Ubuntu has been appropriated in the post-apartheid context to sustain a 'nationalist ideology' that glorifies an imagined past. He avers that the pre-occupation with nation-building in an attempt to build a more moral and hopeful future for South Africans has opened up a space for cultural conformism and a nationalistic mindset that is not too dissimilar in its operation and objectives from that of Afrikaner nationalism that relied on and (re)produced propaganda and control. While overtly premised on a notion of 'inclusion' through its goal of harmony and unity, it covertly supports a doctrine of 'exclusion', since it fosters identity-building, and, for Marx, "identity can only be established through difference" (p. 53). Here, nation-building ensures the suppression of dissidence.

In respect of the TRC process and the way in which narratives of violence were granted attention within an Ubuntu framework, Marx draws a correlation between the interests of this project and those of cultural nationalism in the broader political context of post-apartheid South Africa. He says: "Cultural nationalism offers the exculpation as well as the clearance of the conscience, the means as well as the legitimation for ... dehumanization and degradation." This perspective underscores his argument that cultural nationalist ideology is "inherently conformist and hence inimical to the pluralism implicit in the democratic project." (p. 49). He makes reference to the way in which Ubuntu was used in the TRC to support a concept of nation-building that relied on cultural conformism in the terms: "This personification of the TRC process shifted the problem from the roots and causes of apartheid to 'ethics'; analyzing was substituted with moralizing" (p. 51). In this way, Marx raises an important issue that he believes the TRC failed to attend to and which Ubuntu provided the veil for its avoidance: that violence, in its daily silences and lived forms, not just the gross human rights violations and ghoulish atrocities which became fodder for consumptive audiences, was addressed. In this way, apartheid in its less-than-blatant systematic character could not be raised for historical and political analysis. Reparation and restorative justice was not about structural and institutional reconciliation, which might have demanded a thorough evaluation of the system that was implicitly supported and the mechanisms that became possible because of apartheid ideology, but was more an emphasis on forgiveness and healing through the community-orientated tenets of Ubuntu.

Ramose (2002) takes an even more critical stance in his words:

In an effort to win the support of the numerical majority population in the country, the conqueror appealed to *ubuntu* and used it tactfully to remove the causes of its own fear. Here it is important to understand that the majority of the

South African population continues to be nurtured and educated according to the basic tenets of *ubuntu*, notwithstanding the selective amnesia of a small segment of the indigenous elite. For example, *ubuntu* was included in the interim constitution to justify the necessity for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yet, the necessity for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cannot be said to be the expression of the will of the conquered people of South Africa. This is because the necessity was a unilateral decision by the political leadership of the conquered people (p. 487).

While Marx sees the lack of critical interrogation of the apartheid structures as a failing of the TRC, and Ramose sees it as lacking the will of the majority of the people, both because of the take up of Ubuntu in its processes, many others believe that it was this very process guided by the philosophy of Ubuntu that was its unique success, setting itself apart from the tone of the Nuremberg trial and other post-war tribunals. For these, it was the *strength* of Ubuntu, not its *weakness*, that set the stage to begin healing a very divided society and permit spaces for forgiveness, healing and transcendence towards a more unified South Africa, able to draw on interpretive understandings of the past, but face a non-racial, non-violent, hopeful and democratic future. I have argued this in relation to my own research in the following terms:

The struggle for Ubuntu, on a local and national scale, served as a philosophy of struggle for people trying to heal the brutality and desperateness of a deeply ruptured society. In heart-felt terms, the struggle for Ubuntu became the struggle for the *dignity* and *soul* of South Africa. (Swanson, 2005b, p. 4)

Yet, the mythologizing of Ubuntu is of concern if it is to be believed that the propagation of Ubuntu without attention to structural change will produce egalitarianism and democratic institutions in and of itself. This is to diminish the historical lessons of apartheid, as well as ignore the impact and interrelationship of power, ideology, discourse and context. It could also be argued that the expectations placed on the TRC to provide both healing and political analysis, dialectically opposing expectations, was beyond its mandate and capacity to achieve. The project of historicizing apartheid and the provision of ongoing political analysis is a broader project beyond the TRC, but arguably a very necessary one.

What is, perhaps, of greater concern is the take up of Ubuntu to foster a conformist nation-building by the new political elite that smacks, in some ways, of similar tactics to the apartheid regime and that deflects criticism of its own means and operations in these terms. As Marx notes: “Social problems of the ‘new’ South Africa are, increasingly, viewed through a nationalist lens” and that “By deriving its mandate from the concepts of Ubuntu and Africanism, the government is able to interpret any criticism of its actions as evidence of its critics’ own limitations”, and lack of commitment to the nation-building project, hence an outsider (p. 54). Ironically, in this sense, and following Marx’s argument, Africanism and Ubuntu are being implemented as cultural nationalist rhetoric to sustain a neoliberal status quo, a bureaucracy attuned to conformist ‘national values’ exempt from critique. This is an important point to consider given that South Africa is a fledgling democracy.



While the last word has not yet been said on the critical relationship between Ubuntu, apartheid, the TRC and nation-building, it is nevertheless important to be cautious about the take up of philosophical ideas and the ideology they become invested in. While some may say that Marx's critique is premised within a Western / European model of Critical Theory (in the vein of the Frankfurt School) and that it appears to lack Ubuntu itself in its tone and emphasis, nevertheless, the recontextualization of African epistemology into a colonized context with a divergent ideology produces opportunities for mythologizing and misappropriation that can be dangerous, resulting in the very opposite of the democratic ideals being fostered. We need to be ever vigilant even as we embrace opportunities for transcendence.

It is with this cautionary note on Ubuntu in its political appropriations at the national level, that I change tone here, and provide a more narrative-based and reflexive experience of how Ubuntu assisted me, personally, in my own research in post-apartheid South Africa. This is not the Ubuntu of cultural nationalism as interpreted by the current political leadership in South Africa, but one which serves as a guiding principle for the ethics of personal relationships in a research context at the local level. This leads into the second section of my discussion, Part II.

## **PART II**

### *A personal journey*

I come to an understanding of Ubuntu through lived experiences, having grown up in apartheid South Africa. I attended university there during the height of the liberation struggle, witnessed the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and with fellow South Africans and others around the world, celebrated the transition of my country of birth to democracy. I became aware of the concept of Ubuntu from an early age. My mother was careful to expose me to the responsibilities, contributions and consciousnesses of citizenship and community in an African context. I experienced Ubuntu, first hand, through love and friendship with Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho South Africans. The anti-apartheid movement also offered its own unique (re)presentation of a nation and a people struggling for a way of engaging and being, offered through the philosophy of Ubuntu, that was the outcome of a peaceful, non-violent, non-racial South Africa. Nevertheless, I was *also* acutely aware of the difficulty and near impossibility of achieving Ubuntu in many contexts of segregated South Africa, as well as *my* role and responsibility as being indirectly implicated in this as a white South African.

### *The journey continues*

My doctoral dissertation, completed at The University of British Columbia, is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding pedagogized disadvantage and its realizations as *lived disadvantage* in and across diverse socio-political and economic contexts. I returned to South Africa for several months to undertake fieldwork in schooling communities there. Many of the communities in which the inquiry was based were situated in contexts of extreme socio-economic poverty.

Consequently, ethical issues associated with respectful ways of being in research with such communities, the moral dilemmas faced through research engagement, the positionality of research relationships, the power relations invested in such relationships and through institutional engagement, as well as the researcher's location and 'ways of seeing', all became critical issues of concern in the research process. As a personal ethic, it was necessary for me to find less objectifying ways of being in research; ways which would contribute to disrupting and decolonizing dominant meanings, not contribute to 'deficit discourse' (Bernstein, 1990, 2000) and the construction of disadvantage, which produces meanings from privileged perspectives.

It was here that Ubuntu provided a vision and framework for me for respectful engagement in research of this nature; one that permitted reflexivity, reciprocity, community connectedness, and cross-cultural understanding, through a sense of 'humble togetherness'. It also provided opportunities for life-enriching and transformative experiences, and, importantly, spiritual growth. A focus on Ubuntu in its socio-cultural and political context, helped to *highlight* the multitude of interrelated moral, ethical and ideological dilemmas faced in fieldwork experiences in a context of 'poverty', while paradoxically also serving to provide a way *through* the quagmires and contradictions, and achieve transformation through a transcendent spirituality. It is through my narrative exploration of research issues, ambiguities and contradictions in their full, often irresolvable and ungraspable complexity – narrative that often bordered on autoethnography – that Ubuntu was drawn into my research, shaping my research experiences, in ways that offered lived pedagogies of hope and possibility...

#### *The narrative in context*

To exemplify only a small aspect of this research engagement with Ubuntu and how, through a reflexive narratizing, it might deconstruct hegemonic meanings and allow for other possibilities of being in the world, I will provide a short, edited extract from a dissertation narrative.

To set the scene, I am sitting in the office of a principal at a missionary elementary school situated in a shanty or informal settlement. The conditions of poverty are evident everywhere. As I am in conversation with the principal and I hear him criticize educational 'progressivism', my mind begins to question some of the practices I have observed at this school – corporal punishment; procedural and indifferent teaching practices; endless meetings held during class time; teachers not coming to school for days, weeks sometimes, on end; closing the school early so that very small children have to walk home alone where they are not attended to because their caregivers are at work... the anger and frustration begins to build – I'm wanting to 'speak out' and ask him 'why', 'is this what we were liberated for?' ... but I don't ...

#### *The narrative excerpt*

And I know at this moment that there is no Ubuntu here... there is only me – the researcher, and him – the principal... And then the blinding moment of anger passes... and I am back within this situated reality... I look out of the window... I see two girls scuffing their shoes in the red dirt... the dry dust rises in a small wisp

of smoke... then one girl suddenly grabs the other girl from the back by her hair and pulls her down into a kneeling position. There is anguish on the victim's face... but she doesn't resist. And it appears to me that this has happened to her many times before and she is no longer indignant, resistant, affronted... Her hopeless resignation angers me...

I jump up and move to the window looking down onto the scene in the courtyard, the crisscrossing Euclidean grid of the window frame between us... the bully turns her eyes towards me and looks through the pane... looks through her own pain ... even with a blank undaunted stare... staring into my face contorted with a horrible mixture of anger, disappointment and pity... The Principal sees my reaction and he too jumps up to have a look at what I am looking at... He swears under his breath in Afrikaans... his composure is broken, ... we are back to the immediacy and brutal 'reality' of the moment... he relays to me in English: "Their teacher isn't here again today", as if I might not have known this self-evident piece of information. "Excuse me a minute", he says brusquely, and walks hastily out of the office, across the courtyard, up the steep steps and stops in the open doorway of the offending classroom.

From my visual perspective, the classroom behind the principal's dominant form is dark, unseeable and formless, like an auditorium when the lights have gone down - ready for the performance... a performance on a 'stage-in-the-round'. The two girls have already disappeared back into the same room ... caught out ... scampering, like a pair of frightened rabbits back into their dark burrow... I can see the principal shouting and gesticulating threateningly. He is silhouetted against the dark doorway, delineated by the door, and through the windowpane I can hear nothing of what he says... there is only silence... and it is loud in my ears... it is as if I am watching an old-fashioned silent movie, being played out before me ... a performance in silence on the theme of silence, ... visible, audible silence, ...

I am trying to comprehend the scene... I think of the two rabbit girls scurrying away when the Voice of Authority entered the scene... I am a schoolgirl again... waiting in the principal's office... I am remembering the fear of bullies ... bullies that took all forms... classmates and teachers... I am remembering the smell and taste of fear ... the fractured, brutal, images of authority and its violent sting... I feel the same sick feelings coming back... deafening fragments of memories. I feel like a bewildered animal caught in the headlights of this strange blinding reenactment of repeated repressive realities....

At that moment ... and it was not an epiphany ... but a slow blurred form taking root... re-rooting in my mind. It was a slow re-realization of what I had done by wanting to 'speak out' and to tell this principal that I thought it was 'just not good enough'. ... It was a recognition of my *own* voice of violence... of what brutality I had done in feeding into the deficit discourse, on "disadvantage", I realized that my thoughts, framed within the discursive roots of my socialization, had established that "disadvantage" as "plain to see".

I began to realize that in my initial thought-words of anger, I had been taking on the colonizing voice that produces the deficit, and that creates, validates and establishes ‘the problem’ from outside... from a place out there that can speak unmonitored by its own surveillance... I had been doing the same thing as that which I had surveyed in the courtyard. I was producing and reproducing the very conditions that produced the bully/ bullying in the first place, ensuring its reproduction... albeit a silent language of thoughts.

In those moments, I too was a bully. I was complicit with a system that establishes the ‘truth’ on ‘deficit’, and *lays blame*... I realized that by creating the teachers, principal and their pedagogic practices in this “disadvantaged community” as *lacking*, as ‘the problem’... it was a way of not facing up to not understanding... not seeing the source of power and how it threads its way into the repressive web...

My realization came only when I could begin to understand-feel with a *deeper listening* – the kind of deeper listening that renders one human. ...And so this had become my route.... Instead of trying to find the “root of the problem” and trying to “root out the problem”, like a cancer from living tissue, instead I was beginning to move towards searching for “*the source*”. The source of the problem lay silently *behind* the construction of “the problem” itself and threaded its way, like a tributary, to my very doorstep... I too was complicit, a collaborator of deficit discourse, a root of “the problem’s” rootedness. Now I became responsible as well, through acknowledging that responsibility.

The I-you dichotomy had been broken by the emergence of a new bond of responsibility ... a *humbling togetherness*, a *sense of Ubuntu!* I needed to *listen* collaboratively to that “source” in collectively finding a way together of “re-sourcing” towards non-impoverishment, other possibilities and mutual healing. With the sense of responsibility and humility came the opportunity for transformation and transcendence, both political and spiritual. It was the kind of calling in which one could recognize oneself in the image of the other as an organic relationship of ‘humble togetherness’.

### *In closing*

By embracing Ubuntu in reflexive narrative in its contribution to understanding positions of dominance and deficit, a dialogue becomes possible about the nature of transformation and transcendence beyond personal, political paradoxes informed by neo-colonial and neo-liberal ideology. It creates a rootedness with the daily, local and lived. It assists with reflexive, critical engagement that explores less objectifying ways of being in research, through the inclusion of the self and the self’s role in achieving humble togetherness with the research community. It offers hope of engendering pedagogies of possibility away from dichotomous discourse and positivist approaches to qualitative research. By confronting the constructed meanings of our knowledges, identities, and ways of seeing, and by attempting to ‘resource’ these through co-construction and ‘humble togetherness’,

the storying seeks to find a transcendent spirituality. Consequently, Ubuntu contributes to disrupting and decolonizing hegemonic meanings, and provides an opportunity for renewal and transformation in our desire for egalitarianism and human dignity. It affords a way of knowing that helps us learn to become human.

### **Conclusion**

It is necessary to caution against the misappropriation of Ubuntu for ideological purposes that emphasize conformism and hence exclusion. Any philosophy taken up politically at an institutional level is prone to becoming rhetorical and becomes caught up in instruments of power producing unwanted implications. Nevertheless, Ubuntu is meritorious of advocacy in what it offers for human engagement in terms of a transcendent spirituality, as well as its important contribution to validating African ways of knowing and being. We might agree that Mbeki is occasionally fallible as a democratic leader of South Africa. Fallibility is part of the human condition. The task for Mbeki is especially daunting given the competing challenges to strengthen South Africa's fledgling democracy, eradicate poverty and unify the people. Nevertheless, he can certainly be applauded for his advocacy of Ubuntu in its ethical commitment to egalitarianism and human dignity.

Ubuntu undoubtedly emphasizes responsibilities and obligations towards a collective well-being. On a global scale, greater co-operation and mutual understanding is very necessary to a sustainable future for all with respect to the ecological, moral and social well-being of its global citizens, human and otherwise. Ubuntu provides legitimizing spaces for transcendence of injustice and a more democratic, egalitarian and ethical engagement of human beings in relationship with each other. In this sense, Ubuntu offers hope and possibility in its contribution to human rights, not only in the South African and African contexts, but across the globe. In support of this final assertion on human rights, I conclude with the words of Tim Murithi, Programme Officer at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. In writing on a culturally inclusive notion of human rights and its implications for a new international charter, Murithi (2004) draws on the philosophical underpinnings of Ubuntu towards this end. He says:

The moment perhaps has come then where new life can be given to the global campaign for human rights by reformulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, together with a re-emphasis of the provisions relating to social and economic justice, which have been virtually neglected of the last 52 years, it is necessary to re-articulate our aspirations to human rights much more in the language of obligations which in turn would then infer an unambiguous call to action. In essence, a re-articulation of human rights from an Ubuntu perspective adds value to the human rights movement by placing more of an emphasis on the obligations that we have towards the 'other.' (p. 15)

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