Book Review

In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research

Diane M. Caracciolo & Anne M. Mungai, Editors
Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2009

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The idea as well as the possible practices of the humanist African philosophy of Ubuntu has lately gained some momentum both in community locales and in formalized spaces of learning. The reasons for this expansion and essentializable appreciation should not be proscribed as simply emanating from systematized academic interests that would, by and large, demonstrate a certain spirit of a given tempo-spatial zeitgest that might fulfill our research curiosities which are, institutionally and occasionally counter-institutionally, justifiable. There should be more to the case than that. From a tentatively simplifiable, if subjectively informed understanding, the philosophy as well as the epistemology of ubuntu, have become, not only new systems of knowledge and knowing, but as well, non-linearist forms of reading the world, which seemingly represent contemporaneously needed life-oriented perspectives of learning and doing that could indicate, at least partially, the inadequacy of the epistemic constructions we have been making use of, in the past half century or so.

With an enlightenment driven rationalist view of knowledge, we have inherited modernist understandings of the human context that are subjectively detached and epistemically dominating. It is, I would suggest, partially although not fully intentionally, because of this that we are realizing the need to seek onto-epistemological solace, even some existential salvation, from the ontologically more attached ubuntu ways of understanding, analyzing, and responding to the world. Indeed, the philosophical foundations and emerging contexts of ubuntu should not be read as purely philosophical in the traditional sense of the construct and its practices. Here, the philosophical should be realizable through the epistemological, and should aim for more expansive notations and practices that critically view the world via active but essentially inclusivist projects which affirm the interrelated learning and livelihood being of all.

It is with this understanding that Diane Caracciolo and Anne Mungai's book is timely, socio-epistemically responsive, and capable of achieving praxically constructive interventionist possibilities in learning and living through the thick realities of our narrations and phenomenological locations. At the core of this work therefore, is the sure-footed, primary prospect of ubuntu where we shall aim to see, even achieve, our humanity through the humanity of the other. Hence the important focus on collaborative community actions (or activities) that define the academic lives of its contributors. Indeed, in referring to Desmond Tutu's note on the back cover, we should heed the collective call that in exercising humanist and humanely located categories of life, it is not *my* or *your* detached quasi-objectifiable self reflections that explain the persons we are or want to become, but our social relationships that should define and

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operationalize our place in the living middle of human societies that can either thrive together or oppress and exploit each other. This is again, one possible trigger of the need to go back to the interpersonally and inter-civilizationally enriching domains of the ubuntu perspective. Admirably, many contributors to this volume discuss their personal and professional engagements, which affirm their devoir quotidian as minimally emanating from, or more so, informed by ubuntu life possibilities.

The book is divided into four sections labelled as "Ubuntu," "Healing," "Respect," and "Community," with all subsumable to the conceptualizations and practicalizations of the overall ubuntu project; the sections altogether contain 12 chapters. The chapters are structured and written in ways that are counter-conventional, and that clearly respond to both the spirit and action-oriented contours of ubuntu. The autobiographical nature of many chapters represents for me, the desired decolonization of the concerned educational descriptions, analysis, and criticisms. In the modernist framework of rationalist schooling, we are asked to depersonalize ourselves, our histories, our cultures, and indeed, our overall being to make sense of the objective, which in a true sense, is only an epistemological mirage that cannot effectively explain our intellectual understandings or the need to acquire meaningful, viable education that can truly respond to our needs and expectations. As some of the chapters show (e.g., chapter 3), the world of ubuntu is not only responsive to generalized categories of thinking, but also fully contains pragmatic aspects of life that can fulfill the real needs of learners and others whose expectations could be attended to, via the expansion of the humanness that binds us all to the human family.

The autobiographical style certainly fits this kind of work, and undoubtedly gives us a closer look into the ontological locations of the writers, indeed, a fresher and, again, more humane way to read both the world and the word (i.e., with the rightful credit accorded to Freire and others concerned). Needless to add that our attachment to the formations of old academic habits, could yearn for more direct pointers from the nature and connecting threads of ubuntu. Delightfully, many chapters in the book combine the subjectively personal with general research-based sections that respond to this selectively justifiable expectation. Chapter 1 achieves that combination by starting with a space-triggered, inter-human interaction and remembering, and is followed by some excellent foci on ubuntu as an African philosophy of life, learning, and achieving. Other chapters also fulfill the promise of achieving deeper but still connected topical and subjective descriptions and analysis that should critically expand the potential of readers' horizontal interactions with Africa's peace epistemologies (chapter 2) along with discussions on ways of restoring hope and a strong space of reference for community life; self transformations through inclusive teaching intentions and practices (chapter 4); and the resilience of Native women in the face of systematic and ongoing attempts of historical and cultural erasure (chapter 5).

In the following chapters, the focus on the painter's transformation via the adoption of inter-subjectively and interculturally humanizing artistic devoirs is especially telling in the way we can de-otherize the human locations that surround our existentialities. From there, it is good to see the academic who de-rationalizes herself (and in the process, extensively humanizes her being) via the active intersectionalities of her teaching spaces; or the concretizable belief to reconstruct and achieve the good community; and the lately expanding contexts of re-affirming our agency through the narration of our life histories, among other excellent explanations and analysis. All of these should help aim for, and achieve "otherizing-proof" and "ubuntu-ized" epistemic and pedagogical platforms that affirm the humanity of all through the humanity of all. Realistically,

though, this noble human objective will not be an easy project to achieve; the essence of the so-called liberal democracies we reside in, in North America, which are also now being proposed for everybody else in the world, are selectively, if not entirely, counter-ubuntu, but any project of epistemological and inter-subjective humanizations is worth striving for, and any educational projects that can aid it are long overdue.

In all, this is an excellent and timely book that achieves the expansion as well as the affirmation of the active philosophy of ubuntu as a living and humanistically inclusive praxis of teaching, learning, and working together to proactively engage the rationalist and individualistic ways of life that have become dominant in our social and physical environments. The book also shows the way for new possibilities of seeing beyond the contemporary objectifications of personal and professional spaces, and via its pages, ushers in, the touchable realities of people transforming their lives, not just for their individual needs and desires, but for the unqualified well-being of the community. As such, *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research* represents a seminal educational intervention that should re-direct the way we see and interact with learning and pedagogical projects and relationships. The book is well organized, is written in non-alienating, humanist language, and should be very useful for students, researchers, and the general public. Students in the West, who are not familiar with the philosophy of ubuntu, should be exposed to the contents of this book. Ubuntu, originating from Africa, should now be seen as holistically and globally relevant humanist philosophies and epistemologies of life, that could help to lead us to better prospects of living, learning, and socially achieving.

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