***Ubuntu* and ecofeminism: Value-building with African and womanist voices**

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Abstract: To build a front against neoliberalism, those in the alter-globalisation movement work across perceived divides. However, such transversal openness has not been embraced fully within the academic sphere, even though theoretical coalitions are also important to developing a life-affirming societal ethos. Meaningful opportunities for theoretical bridging do exist, particularly where hitherto isolated alternative value systems can be drawn into the wider, global dialogue on societal futures. In this spirit, this article offers some transversal reflections on materialist ecofeminism and one such marginalised value system, the African ethic of ubuntu.

Introduction

Activists in movement politics are no strangers to transversalism, which social movement scholar Hamed Hosseini describes as 'requir[ing] openness and the intention of exchanging experiences and ideas across a variety of local fields of resistance' (2015: 58). In recent years many movements have emerged with the aim of countering neoliberalism, which 'is best understood as an ideology – a doctrine which provides only a partial representation of the world and whose misrepresentations mask material processes which benefit dominant class interests' (Cahill, 2012: 117). As a system, neoliberalism involves 'advocacy of the policy suite of privatisation, deregulation and marketisation' (Cahill, 2014: 15), and it entails 'people [being]…constituted materially as consumers of public services' and of fetishised

commodities (Cahill, 2014: 135). This sees 'people's relationships with others…increasingly mediated through markets and commodities' (Cahill, 2014: 135); commodities that are designed for obsolescence, aesthetic or otherwise, 'to ensure consumer demand for the proliferating variety of "new" goods' (Smart, 2010: 84). The social and ecological fallout of this system is evident (Smart, 2010: 55-59, 149-154, 160-179; Clapp and Dauvergne, 2005: 32-40), and in response cooperation is under way between different interest groups, allied in their demand for different forms of globalisation and alternative lifeways. Notable examples of such transversal activism were the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Sklair, 2002: 291), and the Occupy Movement demonstrations (Gautney, 2010: 181). Further, an international platform, the World Social Forum (WSF), has been developed to provide a space for coalition-building between various groups, ranging from subsistence farmers to academicians (Prempeh, 2006: 66-68). This helps to constitute a transversal politics, characterised by:

(1) recognition of diversity and difference, (2) dialogue (deliberation across differences), (3) systemic self-reflection, (4) intentional openness (intention to explore the reality of the Other), (5) critical awareness of the intersectional nature of power relations that affects interconnections, and finally (6) commitment to create alterity through hybridization and creolization of ideas and deeds. (Hosseini, 2015: 58)

The first-order transversal activism described above, is occurring in the global political arena and is relatively well established and well documented. Yet this does not mean that enough is being done to develop values for a different future: intellectuals of all kinds have a role to play. They could well engage in a second-order transversalism, involving interdisciplinary interaction between apparently discrete bodies of knowledge. The theorisation emerging from

such interaction in turn stands to be adopted, adapted, and/or challenged in political experience, amounting then to a third-order transversalism. This is not to deny that interdisciplinary work is being done across the world; it is only to underscore the necessity of augmenting it considerably (Joas, 1996: 1; Connell, 2014: 1, 11). In short, a silo approach to intellectual endeavour is unhelpful if the point is to help map and address contemporary global crises, given the layered complexity and sheer scale of the latter – which additionally necessitate exchanges of ideas across nations.

A question that arises is: how can southern African thinkers contribute to the transversal project? It is argued here that initiating transversal dialogue between different knowledge-makers, not only different activist strands, is of crucial importance in countering the destructive neoliberal organisation of societies. More specifically, this article seeks to bring ecofeminist thought into conversation with the southern African indigenous philosophy of ubuntu. Given the entanglement of Africans with the rest of the world (Mbembe, 2001: 8, 14), it will not do simply to redeploy dwindling indigenous views and practices in any straightforward manner. Already in the 1980s the Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe cautioned against any such attempt – believing that it risks uncritical aestheticisation or essentialising of traditional African knowledges (1988: 196-197), and relatedly, rejection of knowledges external to Africa. Similar pitfalls face any fetishising of 'European' thought.

A transversal approach entails careful, critical appropriation of indigenous and 'outside' knowledges to help address problems facing Africa and other regions in the global South. A similar strategy could be followed, whereby indigenous knowledges are used in association with more 'modern' theories to deal with problems encountered in the 'developed', global

North. This latter approach has been promoted by anthropologist Dave Aftandilian in relation to the appropriation of Native American environmental ethics within urban America (2011: 219-246). For a long time, African thinkers have been of a similar opinion. The Beninese neo-Marxist Paulin Hountondji promotes synthesis of the best of indigenous and European knowledges, without 'making an absolute of the internal rationality of these traditions…in order to help us meet the challenges and problems of today' (1983: 136-137). Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu likewise advocates intercultural engagement in knowledge-making (1996: 153).

Ubuntu and ecofeminism

In the spirit of such a culturally open, transversal stance, this article endeavours to bring indigenous African ethical thought (ubuntu) into dialogue with materialist ecofeminist ideas. Ubuntu refers to an ethical framework common among sub-Saharan African communities, in which care for others and the environment is considered key to the development of personhood and esteem. Materialist ecofeminism is a version of ecological feminism premised on the assumption that the material conditions of life – economic and environmental ones – shape power relations, economic and cultural practices, skills and ideas. The resonances between the two traditions are unsurprising, considering similar forms of exploitation historically experienced by women and indigenes. Both groupings have been framed as 'closer to nature',[1] ideologically speaking, enabling exploitation of their labour, which, not quite falling within the ambit of industrial productivism, is not seen as 'real' work

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[1] Nature is understood here as an ideological construct concealing the fact that all humans, like nonhuman animals and other entities, are part of the environment. The construct places the environment, like woman and indigene, as an 'other' to be exploited at will by the supposedly independent 'economic man'.

(Mies, 1998: 4, 16). Transversal association of ecofeminism and ubuntu is also a corrective against certain African thinkers (e.g. Ojomo, 2011: 104) who give short shrift to ecological feminism. Another reason for placing indigenous African voices into conversation with those of materialist ecofeminists is because both groupings are speaking of the cultivation of life-affirming, regenerative values crucial to promoting environmental sustainability (Salleh, 1997: 17). It is no accident that precisely those activities embodying these shared values are largely un-valued and un-spoken within neoliberalism, in which many negative environmental and social effects generated are simply externalised. Ubuntu and ecofeminism counter such blindness, emphasising interrelatedness and interdependence. In the present article three significant themes common to both traditions will be traced: critique of dualistic thought, the value of care-giving, and protection of community. That said, consideration must be given to how the two traditions differ in certain respects, and such reflections also are provided.

The present article follows the strategy of the Canadian philosopher Daniel Bell and the Africanist thinker Thaddeus Metz, who undertook a similar parallel research comparison between ubuntu and Confucianism. In their article they focused on three themes relating to the two traditions: community, partiality, and age. Strong similarities between the traditions emerged, but some shortfalls of each also were identified. For instance, the authors criticised Confucianism for lacking a reconciliatory spirit present in ubuntu, while ubuntu was problematised for deemphasising education as a means of self-development (Bell and Metz, 2011: 273-290). Bell and Metz described their endeavour as 'preliminary reflections [that] can inspire further…dialogues between long-standing and large-scale non-Western traditions…as non-Western societies assume greater importance in the global system and as the search continues for a "global ethic"' (2011: 80). Such a transversal trajectory is followed

here as well, and the succeeding thematic analyses of ubuntu and ecofeminism are by no means exhaustive. Rather, like Bell and Metz's contribution discussed above, they are offered in the interest of inviting exchange between ubuntu and materialist ecofeminist proponents, and between ubuntu and other related paradigms and movements, such as the Andean *vivir bien* (living well) philosophy (Bodley, 2012: 310-311). The transversal exercise that follows embraces the need for synergistic development of alternative value systems, and seeks a deepening of the exploration beyond this contribution, both theoretically and in praxis.

Critique of dualistic thought

Beginning in the ancient Greek tradition and carrying through Judeo-Christian thought and European colonisation, there has been a tendency toward dualistic thinking (Salleh, 1997: 55-61; Mies, 1998: 210-211; Ruether, 1975: 195), with mind separated from body, man separated from woman, man separated from 'nature' so-called, and so on. Such dualisms have fostered the illusion of a significant difference of 'thinking man' from his 'other' – indigene, woman, nonhuman animal, and the environment itself. This idea of difference carries with it a belief in man's independence from and superiority over his others, so legitimising their exploitation in his service. This ideological orientation pervades discourses buttressing and actions perpetuating neoliberalism today, in which both men and women are encouraged to participate. Given this, ecofeminists rightly caution that when one speaks of 'thinking man' or 'economic man', these terms must be understood as indicating a type rather than an individual of a particular gender or sex. They indicate any individual who valorises economic activity as the pinnacle of societal progress at the expense of all else, and who questions neither their privilege nor how their lifestyle impacts negatively on sustaining others. The British ecofeminist Mary Mellor describes this type of individual as '[e]conomic

man…the product of an ahistoric, atomised approach to the understanding of human existence' (2009: 254). Economic man's perspective is convenient when the aim is to squeeze every last drop of energy out of labouring bodies, and every ounce of material out of the environment. But obviously, from a social justice or environmental sustainability perspective, it is enormously problematic. Still, within mainstream discourses, present-day economic activities appear largely immune from ethical critique, possibly due to parallels deceptively drawn between 'economic "laws"…and the "laws" of physical science' (Nelson, 2003: 135) – as though economics is not a human fabrication but a fact of life or a force of nature, even. Ultimately, such an approach, based on reductive dualistic assumptions, superficially separates economic processes from their material fallout, environmental and social.

Contemporary African philosophers who are developing ubuntu philosophy by drawing on the practices and experiences of especially sub-Saharan (Ramose, 1999: 81-82) African peoples, have identified the operation of dualistic reasoning in the colonial project – with the African seen as lesser than the colonial 'master'. The result was the political subjection of Africans, the belittling of their traditions, and the eradicating of their subsistence-orientated livelihoods. As Mudimbe observes (1988: 17):

a dichotomizing system…emerged, and along with it a great number of…paradigmatic oppositions…developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economics versus highly productive economies…[all aiming to] trivializ[e] the whole traditional mode of life and its spiritual framework.

Wiredu, in his turn, has commented on the incompatibility between dualistic thinking epitomised in the Cartesian mind/body split, and 'traditional African thought habits which are frequently empirical' (1998: 102). He ascribes any dualistic perspectives held by Africans to their embrace of Christianity (Wiredu, 1996: 125). While not all in the European philosophical community embraced dualistic patterns of thought, dualism features strongly in dominant Western discourses. But in precolonial African discourses it did not, and in the understanding of subsistence communities in Africa, it still does not hold sway. The Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti confirms that in African village societies 'the spirit-body divide has always been suspect' and 'embodied grounds of knowledge' are prioritised, as 'the village stands for an original point of departure in epistemic matters' where 'the unavoidable fact of a physical universe…is confronted day in and day out' (2004: 124-126). Such understandings are rooted in embodiment and are eminently pragmatic.

Despite this, Christianity was used to frame Africans, with their ancestor-worship, as lacking in *logos* and harbouring *mythos* only. South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose maintains that this helped cast the African as a savage: as 'defective in its ontology…a being without reason', who 'cannot qualify as a human being' (2003: 116). Through this, colonial powers were given the '"right" to invade' (Ramose, 2002: 29) and religious authorities the right to convert; ostensibly, anything stemming from Europe only would help to 'civilise' and refine the African. It was also argued that African men (like all women), are overly emotional – activating the reason/emotion dualism in the denigration of both groupings. Certainly, emotional judgment forms part of decision-making but is scorned within rationalism. This is something that Senegalese cultural theorist Léopold Senghor is at pains to criticise. For him, rationalism involves 'distrust[ing] the imagination and particularly the emotions: everything that distracted or beguiled rational thought' (1986: 78). Countering this perspective, Senghor

instead proposes 'emotion as "a manner of thinking" or "way of knowing"' (Masolo, 2010: 95) not inferior to reason. Ramose likewise argues that an African philosophical perspective 'recognis[es]…the indivisibility [and]…mutual dependence of the "rational" and the "emotional"' (1999: 94). These philosophers expose a false split 'between the rational mind and the disorderly life of the body and the emotions' (Jackson and Karp, 1990: 17). Ramose, specifically, sees that such dualisms have been used to legitimise men's subjection of women and indigenes alike (1999: 1, 6, 15; 2002: 28).

Materialist ecofeminists also criticise dualistic thinking vehemently. Focusing in on patriarchal societies, they hold that women routinely are associated with the body, whereas men are associated with the mind, inviting the 'use' of women as unpaid labour within the home, as sexual objects, and as reproductive sites. Such treatment historically has been reinforced by the notion that woman, due to perceived emotionality, lacks man's rational ability and thus is not 'a properly human presence' (Salleh, 1999: 208). So like indigenes, women could be exploited without casting any doubt on the moral legitimacy of their oppressors. The German ecological feminist Maria Mies even suggests that a subtle form of oppression is inherent in the European nuclear family model, and likens husbands' (albeit unwitting) exploitation of their wives in the household with colonists' exploitation of indigenes and the environment in the Third World (1998: 110). Returning to the global South, dynamics of domination relying on the activation of dualisms, characterise the neoliberal expansion (or neocolonisation) under way in the name of 'development' (Sachs, 1999: 3). And this so-called development frequently causes grievous social (Collins and Jimenez, 2016: 56-57) and environmental (Mies, 2005: 96) harm. Ecofeminist theorisation is valuable in exposing these interlocking dominations legitimised by dualistic reasoning (Mies, 1998: 224). Australian ecofeminist Ariel Salleh, for example, shows how dualisms are linked

inextricably with intersecting dominations through the formula 'Man/Woman=Nature' (1997: 54). This captures the ideological framing of economic man as different from and superior to woman and nature. Woman and nature, both on the 'lesser' side of the equation, are likened to each other and treated as mere resources (Salleh, 2010: 185-186, 188). New Zealand feminist economist Marilyn Waring in a similar vein argues that women's labour is essentialised away as something that women 'naturally' do (2004: 70). The provisioning labour of indigenous peoples is invisible too, and their bodies, lands, and knowledges are resourced similarly.

Yet such regenerative labour, according to ubuntu theorists and materialist ecofeminists alike, is precisely what allows participants to see through dualistic reasoning. Recall that Menkiti argues dualistic thought to be foreign to indigenous subsistence communities, as their daily labour confirms their embodiment in 'a physical universe' (2004: 126) characterised by interrelation. Likewise, women carrying out care-giving forms of labour in the household – involving humanity-nature bridging, or encounters with natural processes (birthing, cooking, cleaning, nurturing, healing) – cannot easily think of themselves as separate from their environment (Salleh, 1997: 164). In short, certain kinds of labour foster disembodied perspectives, whereas subsistence labours and care-giving cultivate understanding that humans are 'nature' in embodied form (Salleh, 1995: 35). This materialist ecofeminist argument is not essentialist, but rather based in the understanding that one's interaction with, and activities within, one's surroundings work to shape one's skills, perspectives, and knowledges. Unsurprisingly, the interaction of care-givers with those around them also makes them realise that reason and emotion are both necessary in proper judgement (Ahmed, 1998: 52).

Still, dualistic thought is necessary for the continuation of neoliberal expansion, otherwise humankind surely would be aware that it is eroding its own life-support. Already in 1980 the American ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant, in her historical text *The Death of Nature*, spoke of the intimate link between disembodied, abstract thought – especially as it manifests in Western science – and the rise of the capitalist system. In turn, French intellectual historian Pierre Hadot, acknowledging Merchant, likens nature to a shackled woman, and contends that the 'project of dominating nature' has resulted in people in capitalist societies coming to see the physical world mainly as exploitable matter (2006: 121, 123, 137). This framework of hierarchical dualism buttresses neoliberal capitalism, a 'means-end rationalist system of domination' (Salerno, 2003: 131). Ubuntu and ecofeminism oppose such divisive dualistic thought, with ubuntu theorists criticising especially its adverse effects on social relations, and materialist ecofeminists paying particular attention to its negative environmental implications. In both traditions, though, the idea of interdependence is emphasised and informs their conceptions of the development of a care-orientated personhood.

The value of care-giving

There is an intimate link between continued neoliberal expansion and consumerism, established through 'more than three decades of neoliberal thinking and policy' (Styhre, 2014: 204). This has involved 'a profound reshaping and reweaving of relations between state, market, civil society and individuals, under the pressures of a politically guided intensification of market rule and commoditization' (Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead, 2016: 15). As the political economist Damien Cahill explains (2014: 135), 'material changes wrought by neoliberalism to people's everyday lives have…facilitated complementary

subjectivities'. Individuals have become trapped in a work-and-spend cycle centred on consumer rivalry, with exemplary gender identities increasingly tied to the acquisition and donning of consumer accoutrements (Connell, 2010: 1, 5, 78, 131; Osgerby, 2001: 54, 190). The spread of consumerist desires through neoliberal globalisation has proven particularly insidious, because '[a]t the same time that the economic pressures on families in the global South increase, the global media bring images of consumerism to almost every household…in a kind of "material striptease"' (Piller, 2012: 13). The rivalrous and narcissistic individuality encouraged in such a culture, contrasts with the kind of personhood advocated in ubuntu and materialist ecofeminism – a personhood shaped by a profound grasp and appreciation of interdependence and reciprocity.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Ghanaian-American philosopher, explains that '[o]ne of the reasons people act the way they do is because they have the theories of the person that they do' (2004: 31). As discussed, in a neoliberal context people are encouraged to attain status through consumerism and pursuit of related commodity-orientated gender moulds. For men this involves economic one-upmanship, while for women the process often entails fashioning themselves as sexual objects or 'display subjects' (Radner, 1995: 137). Ubuntu proponents advocate an African understanding of personhood, opposed entirely to these above processes and the social atomisation that they produce. They argue that within a traditional African onto-ethical frame, being a *Homo sapiens* does not automatically qualify one as a person. That is, being a *Homo sapiens* 'is an existential datum, [but] personhood is a title conferred upon this datum' (Bewaji and Ramose, 2003: 413), and is only obtainable 'through and together with other human beings' (Ramose, 2010: 300). Personhood is something earned, through engaging in deliberate ethical conduct, understood in terms of fulfilling one's obligations to other members of the community (Masolo, 2010: 142, 160, 164) – not only to

those currently living but also to the ancestors and the yet-to-be-born. So a focus on obligations and supportive, caring, reciprocal interaction with other community members is linked to past, present and future times. This necessitates reverence for the ancestors, care for the living, and deep concern for the future wellbeing of one's successors. Africanist scholar Bert Hamminga usefully clarifies this 'onto-triadism' on which personhood rests, when he discusses the African conception of the community as a tree. The ancestors are the roots, the adult humans the trunk, and their children the branches, leaves, flowers and seeds – and not one part of the tree which is one 'body…can meaningfully survive cut off from the rest' (Hamminga, 2005: 59, 75). In short, the impetus behind qualifying as a person through care-giving runs much deeper than merely instrumental considerations, and is given voice through maxims such as *motho ke motho ka batho* – 'one attains humanity through others' – to be understood in reference to others of the past, the present, and the future. Ethicist Kevin Behrens crucially links the above-described onto-triadism to environmental care as well, arguing that

> many Africans think that since they have inherited the environment from their predecessors in a state which enables their continued livelihood, they ought to show respect and gratitude to their ancestors by emulating the example of their predecessors, by preserving the environment for posterity…A noteworthy aspect of an African sense of moral obligations towards the future lies in the close association between duties to ancestors and duties to descendants. (2012: 185)

Ubuntu theorists do, however, differ when it comes to weighting execution of communal obligations and preservation of individual autonomy. That is, the extent of one's service to others to achieve humanness as well as what criteria must be met, are under dispute in ubuntu

theorisation, and include debates on contentious issues such as acceptance of traditional social hierarchies. For instance, Menkiti appears to take for granted that individuals must submit to established rules, arguing in straightforward fashion that participating

in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations…transforms one from the it-status of early child-hood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense. (1984: 176)

But Kwame Gyekye, a Ghanaian philosopher, finds Menkiti's rigid prescriptions problematic because, for him, communal membership is insufficient for the development of personhood. What is also needed is the capacity to be able to judge independently the norms and values handed down, or in other words, the ability to maturely exercise critique on communal values, especially those entailing injustice or discrimination of any kind (Gyekye, 1997: 54). The importance of fulfilling obligations remains, but space is also made for individual agency and criticism. Ramose again argues that serving others is individually edifying, and demonstrates achievement of one's full human capacity (1999: 43, 64). An element of shame is also associated with selfish actions, because if you do not care for others you do not have *botho* (humanness), and therefore you are not considered fully human (Metz and Gaie, 2010: 275; Ramose, 2010: 300). Wiredu also provides a more measured approach to the development of personhood, and particularly emphasises the role of communication. He asserts that 'a human being deprived of the socializing influence of communication will remain human biologically, but mentally is bound to be subhuman' (1996: 13). From his perspective, communication is key in the construction of societies and communities, since these human collectives are 'not just an aggregation of individuals existing as windowless

monads' (Wiredu, 1996: 13). His argument is underpinned by a profound grasp of communicative and affective human interconnection in a physical community, and counters the one-dimensionality of mainstream thought, including any idea that to be a person or to be human, one need only be rational.

Perhaps even more materially embedded is the insight, communicated by Kenyan philosopher Dismas Masolo, that because the process of achieving personhood depends on others' participation, this necessarily entails one deliberately contributing to the physical survival of others (2010: 168). As Masolo is at pains to point out, understanding personhood as something procedural and inherently communal makes it 'grounded in the empirical fragility of human biology, which requires of the person a great degree of dependency on the specific and deliberate actions of other members of the species in order to grow, develop, and flourish' (2010: 174). Indeed, this grasp of personhood acknowledges humans' species-condition of interdependence, and relatedly places focus on the dignity of others, who both help one to become a person and who are engaged in the development of their own personhood as well. These dynamics of reciprocation and respect all take place against the backdrop of a relational, web-like ontology that could not be more at odds with the individualism of neoliberal consumer discourses.

These embodied, caring, indigenous orientations, particularly as voiced by Masolo, resonate strongly with the nurturant attitudes promoted by ecological feminists and care ethicists – speaking directly to Mellor's association of care-giving labour with 'biological time' activities (2009: 255). Mellor explains that such activities counter narcissism in their inherent selflessness: they require 'immediate altruism' as many of these actions are 'carried out for

only incidental personal gain (the pleasure of close personal relationships) and…cannot be "put off" or slotted into a work schedule' (1992: 54).

There are also strong resonances between the above African elaborations on the achievement of personhood or humanness, and the materialist ecofeminist emphasis on the importance of caring relations to self-development. However, while several ubuntu theorists are approaching this issue conceptually, materialist ecofeminists make their argument from a fundamentally experiential perspective. One can contrast, for instance, Appiah's argument that the theories of personhood that one harbours influence one's behaviour (2004: 31), with Salleh's contention that 'people's experiences in the world shape their perceptions and knowledges' (1999: 208). Certainly, ubuntu theorists acknowledge that the values they speak of were embodied in traditional indigenous societies, and still inform relations in subsistence communities. But they do appear to approach the reintegration of ubuntu values into modern or urban society as requiring discursive inculcation – a challenge some perceive to be insuperable (Matolino and Kwindingwi, 2013: 203-204).

In contrast, from a materialist ecofeminist perspective, embodied learning and routine activities centred around care – usually the domain of women given the roles 'traditionally' allocated to them – are identified as everyday epistemic catalysts. For Mellor (1992: 56), care-giving labour helps participants to cultivate an integrative and precautionary 'women's-experience-reality (WE-reality)' diametrically opposed to an ecologically disembedded 'male-experience-reality (ME-reality)'. In the 'WE economy' of care-giving labour, participants recognise mutual dependence and the centrality of care to the maintenance of life itself, whereas in the 'ME economy' of capitalism, people are encouraged to consider themselves autonomous and independent of others and life processes (Mellor, 2009: 254).

The 'WE economy', in emphasising mutual dependence, nurturance of others, and deep concern for future generations, thus resonates powerfully with the ubuntu proclamation, 'I am because we are'. Since care-giving labour entails interaction with the nonhuman physical world as well, it likely yields ecological insights too. As Salleh explains (1995: 38), the subjectivity of the care-giver develops dialectically, 'permanently forming and reforming itself in collision with the social order…based in a living and embodied materialism that defies the limits of bourgeois epistemology'. The argument that care-givers intuit the intersection between exploitation of the community and of the environment, finds support in the observation that considerably more women than men are involved in environmental activism in the US, where focus falls on both environmental and 'community health' (Sowards, 2007: 195). Further, as the sociologist Shannon Bell argues, there appears to be

identity correspondence between [women's]…personal identities and the collective identity of the environmental justice movement because many view their activism as an extension of their roles as protectors of children, community, culture, and heritage. (2016: 86)

Still, the ecofeminist argument that ethics derives from labour means that men, too, if operating in care-giving and/or subsistence roles, can embody ecological rationality (Salleh, 1984: 344; 1997: 144). Finnish ecofeminist Hilkka Pietilä likewise argues that the life-affirming practices of care-giving women constitute 'an existing alternative culture, a source of ideas and values for shaping an alternative path of development for nations and all humanity' (1987: 26).

Protection of community

Intimately related to a nurturant personhood is a communitarian societal organisation. Anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko once contrasted the communal orientation of African peoples with the self-centredness characterising capitalist domains, arguing:

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us…[We are] a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence…our action is usually…community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach. (2004: 46)

Nigerian philosopher John Bewaji likewise contrasts social relations in indigenous settings with those in neoliberal domains marked by 'mutual antagonism' and 'a constant struggle for possession and delimitation of space' (Bewaji and Ramose, 2003: 398). Ramose agrees, believing that peaceful cooperation is discouraged in free market economies, where instead of community or belonging 'the acquisition and possession of money is the goal of human existence' (2010: 297). Within the indigenous frame, people are encouraged to value others over money, and several maxims give voice to this standpoint, such as *feta kgomo o tshware motho* (go past the cow and hold the human being). It must be remembered that in indigenous African cultures cattle are seen as capital, therefore this maxim emphasises that people must be valued over personal wealth (Ramose, 2010: 291). But the grasp of communal, mutual dependence runs much deeper than axioms, being ingrained in linguistic structures themselves, linked in their turn to ontological and epistemological understandings. A case in point is the relation between 'ubuntu' as communitarian ethic, and 'umuntu' as the human being (Ramose, 1999: 40). As a first point, Ramose asserts that the word ubuntu should be

hyphenated in writing, as well as translated as 'human-ness' rather than 'humanism' (1999: 41):

> ubu- as the generalized understanding of be-ing may be said to be distinctly ontological…[w]hereas -ntu as the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form or a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment may be said to be distinctly epistemological.

He proceeds to elaborate that be-ing and be-coming human or acquiring human-ness (umu-ntu) shares the -ntu root of ubuntu, but focus shifts here to the ethical mode of being human (umu-). Emphasis falls also on human-ness as a constant pursuit, rather than something that can ever be fully obtained as such. In short, '[u]muntu is the specific entity which continues to conduct an inquiry into be-ing, experience, knowledge and truth' (Ramose, 1999: 41) together with others. Masolo directly associates this communal project of developing personhood with working toward the 'common good' (2010: 50). Given these foci, it is enticing to equate the ubuntu ethic to socialism or Western humanism, something also invited by the heavy use of Marxist theory in African political philosophy since the 1930s, and the perspectives of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who noted the overlaps between socialism and indigenous frameworks (Hallen, 2002: 73-74; Martin, 2012: 102-103). Still, over and above the disparity in ontological depth suggested by Ramose, there are also other differences between ubuntu and Western humanism. For instance, Richard Bell posits that Western humanism emphasises the value of 'education and civilization' for emancipation and is founded 'on ancient Greek ideals such as balance of the arts and sciences, [and] cultivation of individual virtues' (2004: 39). He contrasts this with ubuntu, or 'African humanism' as he calls it, which is orientated around the individual's 'place in the

larger order of things: one's *social* order, *natural* order, and the *cosmic* order' (2004: 39), and is thus grounded in relations between peoples, times and spaces, rather than in reference to something more abstract. Notably also, unlike Western humanism, which can be quite anthropocentric, ubuntu involves an embodied, dialectical, and eminently relational understanding of existence. Ramose contends that caring for and cultivating the community 'applies also with regard to the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature' of which 'human beings are indeed part', as '[w]ithout such care, the interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined' (1999: 124).

The environmental value of ubuntu and other indigenous frameworks have been thematised by other thinkers too – cases in point being Kevin Behrens (2010; 2012; 2014), Tama Weisman (2012), and somewhat more indirectly, Robert Figueroa (2006; 2011). Behrens underscores that 'belief in the interdependence of natural entities underlies a requirement that people should respect and live in harmony with the community of nature', and does important work in reemphasising the environmental dimensions of African ethical thought, which he promotes under the rubric of 'African Relational Environmentalism' (2014: 66). Behrens also engages with the issue of moral considerability of nonhuman beings and inanimate natural entities (2014: 77-81) in African thought. Whereas many African philosophers associate ubuntu almost exclusively with human interactions and society, authors such as Behrens underscore the environmental potential of ubuntu, arguing that 'human-centred considerations simply do not exhaust the implications of the sense of interconnectedness of nature in African thought' (2010: 470).

To turn to materialist ecofeminism: its collective, communal focus already received some emphasis in earlier sections of this article. But it is helpful to recapitulate here, that care-

givers – most often women in their roles as mothers and keepers of the home, the family, and to varying degrees the community – constantly are engaged in constructive exchanges with others. Care-giving activities preclude individualism, insularity, and competitiveness, centring instead on 'holding' relationships in place through altruistic efforts, the ability to relate, and adaptability to changing needs. This is consonant with American feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan's findings concerning women's experience as dialogical, web-like, and centred on relationships, yielding 'a nonhierarchical vision of human connection' (1993: 62) – 'sustained by a process of communication' (1993: 32). And while neither all materialist ecofeminists, nor all care-givers, necessarily have recourse to dualism-defying language of the kind discussed earlier in relation to the linguistic assemblages of ubu-ntu and umu-ntu, the way that language is used remains important. Explains Salleh in relation to the materialist ecofeminist theoretical and activist approach:

> To reinforce ecological resistance of ordinary women or to encourage sex-gender sensitivity in activist men, one must use the words they understand. This means working both in the ideological medium and against it at the same time – with people, so that they can develop reflexivity. (2010: 184)

Returning to the centrality of relationships and community: this has led some to construe materialist ecofeminism to be a socialism, or at the very least to deem ecofeminism and eco-socialism to be 'complementary…political strands' (Salleh, 1991: 129). But unlike materialist ecofeminism, certain forms of socialism can be uncritical of productivism and can be technologically optimistic. Also, while environmental concerns are not lost on eco-socialism at least, some eco-socialists remain gender-blind, or neglect investigation of the parallels between the domination of women and of the environment. Some also unwarrantedly criticise

ecofeminists for ostensibly 'privileg[ing] "body" over mind' (Salleh, 1991: 133), and for unnecessarily shifting attention away from the problem of capitalism through emphasising care. The difference between materialist ecofeminism and socialism is similar to the difference between ubuntu and socialism. Ubuntu differs from socialism on account of, inter alia, its ontological and epistemological dimensions, and its focus on the person's embeddedness in various orders and their relation to various times (past, present, and future). Ecofeminism differs from socialism in its social and environmental embeddedness – which necessarily demands thematisation of embodiment; it focuses on people's daily practices of care within a home, a family, a community, an environment.

Indeed, materialist ecofeminists argue that care-giving labour, or the nurture of living metabolisms, helps participants to develop a tentative and relational epistemological stance. This labour is attuned to human embodiment *as* 'nature' since it discloses 'the fundamental reality of human existence, the body's life in *biological time*[:] the time it takes to rest, recover, grow up and grow old' (Mellor, 2009: 255). Like ubuntu thinkers, ecofeminists assert that capitalism breaks down communities and ecosystems, and thus they construe capitalism to be diametrically opposed to the life-affirming ethos that manifests in care-giving labour and related notions of community. Recall Ramose's argument that communal 'harmony in African thought is comprehensive…[as] it conceives of balance in terms of the totality of the relations that can be maintained between human beings…as well as between human beings and physical nature' (1999: 124). This insight resonates powerfully with Salleh's characterising of the ecofeminist paradigm as one

go[ing] beyond dualistic structures by recognising that ecology and society form a relational web where everything flows bio-energetically in/out of everything else. This

ontology of internal relations implies a both/and logic, which means that [the]…epistemology [is]…a dialectical one dealing with process and contradiction. The terms *identity* and *non-identity* refer to moments in the ongoing transformations of 'nature's' – always including our own – material embodiment. (1999: 211)

Such an understanding of existence, as made up of relations and communities – 'cycles of energy, in which fields we as material beings are embedded' (Salleh, 1999: 215) – is very close to the ubuntu view. Ramose echoes the materialist ecofeminists when he argues that from the African perspective, 'entities…[are understood] as the dimensions, forms and modes of the incessant flow of simultaneously multi-directional motion' (1999: 88), and 'no single human being…is the centre of the universe', precisely because '[t]he universe is understood as the unceasing unfoldment of interaction and interdependence between and among all that there is' (1999: 127).

Conclusion

The foregoing provided an outline of strong resonances between African ubuntu and materialist ecofeminist voices, suggesting promising synergies that should be explored further in the spirit of '[t]ransversality…[which] requires engagement in global dialogues and a willingness to discover the less known reality of and care for the Other' (Hosseini, 2015: 58). The proliferation and deepening of transversal exchange between ubuntu and ecofeminist voices are needed for theoretical alliance-building. Further, it is particularly important to link these traditions to movement politics so that the theorisations offered can be applied and tested within, as well as modified in view of, real-world situations. This kind of third-order transversalism was exemplified in Kenyan feminist environmentalist Wangari Maathai's

Green Belt Movement (GBM), where ecofeminist values were applied, tested, and developed in a pragmatic, contextualised manner (Maathai, 2006: 33-40). And such work is ongoing in contemporary ecofeminist praxis, a case in point being Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's activism and projects. Certainly, some African philosophers may be sceptical about any reintegration of ubuntu values in contemporary society (Matolino and Kwindingwi, 2013: 203-204), let alone any attempt to connect ubuntu values to social and environmental justice efforts. But for American feminist theorist Drucilla Cornell (2014), however diluted most people's understandings of ubuntu may be at present, one cannot ignore 'the widespread use of [the word] ubuntu, everywhere from beauty shops to television', which 'at least signal[s] its political and ethical potency'. What is proposed here, is to place this indigenous ethic in dialogue with similar movements globally, especially ones with a firm standing in alternative globalisation politics, such as materialist ecofeminism. The principles of which both traditions speak 'stand…for ecological recovery and nature's liberation, for women's liberation and for the liberation of men who, in dominating nature and women, have sacrificed their own human-ness' (Shiva, 2002: 53).

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