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Ubuntu and the MoreThanHuman Lessons from African and African Diaspora Feminists

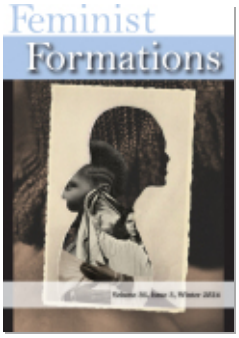
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Unifier Dyer

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Ubuntu and the More-Than-Human: Lessons from African and African Diaspora Feminists[1]

Unifier Dyer

Abstract: *The maxim most closely associated with the African philosophy of* ubuntu, "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," *is attendant to human-to-human relations especially in the fields of African and African Diaspora Feminisms. More pertinent to my research is the larger relationality embedded in ubuntu and which considers the interconnections and interdependence between the living, the ancestors and the unborn, on the one hand, and between the human and other living beings and organisms on the other. To that extent, I engage with ubuntu as an embodied practice grounded both in spirit and in ecology. This paper engages with M. Jacqui Alexander's notion of the* Sacred, *Patricia McFadden's* contemporary feminism, *and Mary Kinyanjui's* utu feminism *to establish how these Africana feminist scholars who acknowledge and work within embodied practices of the Sacred, ecofeminist care, and utu adopt a relationality that resembles the expansive posture of what ubuntu encompasses. They are the forbearers to this work. I describe them as 'relational interlocutors' who have laid the ground for engaging with ubuntu as an inter-being relation that offers emancipatory possibilities for healing.*

Keywords: Ecofeminism / Embodied Knowledge / Healing / Indigenous / More-than-human / Praxis / Relationality / Ubuntu

Introduction

Ubuntu is a moral philosophy that is echoed in indigenous logic across the globe. Although its roots are firmly grounded in southern Africa, it manifests in countless languages, philosophies, and locations across the continent and beyond

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it.[2] It is most readily associated with the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means that "a person is a person because (of or by virtue) others." It is a philosophy of relationality where human to human relations and human to more-than-human relations (i.e. to the sacred realm as well as to nonhuman living organisms) are important, for as Sylvia Tamale (2020) reminds us, "in general the African worldview is relational and formed through active engagement with the ecology and the community" (212). Such engagement makes ubuntu[3] an embodied praxis[4] of relationality intended to lead to liberatory possibilities and future emancipatory imaginings.

The relation to the more-than-humans in ubuntu is embedded in the concept of transitioning—a traversing between the phases: unborn, living, and ancestor. I borrow Wole Soyinka's (1976) concept of transitioning in his seminal essay, "The Fourth Stage," where he defines the transitional phase as an affective space, "the fourth area of experience," and an "immeasurable gulf of transition" (148). This cosmological concept issues from the logic that these significant phases of being and becoming are measured by how and whether we transition between phases. The emphasis is not so readily on these three phases of life, but rather, on the process and the dynamics of transitioning that are meant to facilitate our movement between realms, protect us from the strain of this journeying, and usher us safely, either into this world, or into the next. If read through the prism of ubuntu, transitioning is a measure of how satisfactorily we have kept or maintained our human and more-than-human relations. Equally important in this matrix are nonhuman relations that include the ecological. We see this most clearly in spaces like sacred ecological sites in which the sprit/ethereal meets the material/matter. Such spaces can be communal and thus under the care of a group, or they can be personal in the way Alice Walker (1983) illustrates her mother's garden in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. In either iteration the connection between humans, the sacred, and the ecological is relational.

Relying on M. Jacqui Alexander's (2005) notion of the *Sacred,* the theory-praxes *contemporarity* by Patricia McFadden (2016, 2018), and *utu feminism* by Mary Kinyanjui (2019), this paper highlights the possibilities afforded by a conception of ubuntu at the conjuncture of African and African Diasporic feminist theories of subjectivity. The works of these scholars together engender intersubjective and intra-being connectivity grounded in the African cosmologies they inhabit and embody.

This paper proposes that the Black body in relation with other beings and bodies (ancestors, land, water, animals, plants, women/womxn) can heal—can transition from hurt and harm toward expansive possibilities. For this process to take its fullest expression, the body (fluid, moving, and changing) must be acknowledged as the site of knowledge generation, expression, and praxis. Further, the body that takes part in transitioning is dependent on other beings. Contemporary feminist scholars on the body and embodiment from the

global South have focused on race, memory, will, and agency (Young 2006), marginalization (Anzaldúa 1987), cultural and media representation, imaginings (Henderson 2010), and the gendered colonial body (Tamale 2020). Building upon this, the body is positioned as the mnemonic mouthpiece of the spirit and carries conscious memory about how to know oneself through reconnection, relationality, interdependence, and remembering those who came before us. These all inform the ongoing processes of healing, not just at the physical level but also at the spiritual level. What this means is that the body is not limited to corporeality, but transitions as part of a larger cycle of being. By bringing the body and spirit into ubuntu discourse I hope to further centralize the knowledge of women/womxn.

I will start by discussing ubuntu as an African humanist intellectual discourse that has permeated and shaped many disciplines from philosophy, to gender studies, to politics. I will then analyze ubuntu as an expansive relationality through embodiment, entanglement, and connections to the Sacred while paying particular attention to the body and the praxis it informs. Following this, I will expand on the notion of praxis through a discussion on the reconstitution of relationality, that incorporates more-than-human beings. Such a relationality, I conclude, extends beyond the human-centered Anthropocene and gestures towards liberation dreams inclusive of expansively constituted communities.

Ubuntu As an African Intellectual Discourse

In the larger African intellectual discourse, ubuntu is widely considered a human quality, read through the lenses of African humanism, African philosophy, ethics, and worldview (Gade 2011, 309). At the center of ubuntu is the human who is often in the image of Man, endowed with the capacity to engage with other entities and beings only secondarily to human relations (Wynter and McKittrick 2015). When ubuntu is positioned within this framework, it stands as a philosophy and politics of affirmation that African humanism, philosophy, and logic exist and can serve all of humanity. As such, ubuntu is framed as inclusionary and therefore distinct from what is known as Western humanism, which is exclusionary (Tutu 1999). However, the dependence on ubuntu in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC 1995), for example, has highlighted gender concerns and the reliance on women's bodies to undertake the labor of care ubuntu necessitates (Gobodo-Madikizela 2017; Driver 2005). Further, the precarity of women's bodies has been articulated in contemporary violence(s) and femicide women face (Sanni and Ofana 2021).

Between the 1800s and 1980s, ubuntu was understood as a quality descriptive of a certain group, Africans. Significantly, Christian Gade (2011) observes that ubuntu was in this period also identified as humanism (309). The era was marked by a proliferation of writings that either affirmed African life through nationalist narratives or positioned Africans outside white norms and within

colonial and apartheid rhetoric. From the 1980s onwards, political aspirations drew more definitively on ubuntu to imagine a more humane African independence. Stephen Bantu Biko's (1979) Black Consciousness, for example, is an ideology that situates itself within the principles of ubuntu philosophy for the purpose of political, social, and mental liberation. Other examples of African-centered ideals of the era include Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's socialist ideal *Ujamaa*, Senegal's Léopold Sédar Senghor's Negritude, and Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah's consciencism. These thinkers have often been read as adopting the prism of communitarianism, positioned as the antithesis of individualism (Wiredu 2008; Ikuenobe 2006).[5] This is a noteworthy point because ubuntu is often read as communitarian, to the exclusion of the individual—an argument that has since been refuted (Molefe 2017; Masolo 2004). More immediately, within the political discourse, the struggle has been for the humanity of *abantu* or individuals and communities of African descent such that even when women, land, and animals are evoked, it is to reaffirm the capabilities of the human, especially those who have been denigrated to subhuman categories (Biko 1979). When attending to the political, however, we should not overlook ubuntu's relationship to the spiritual. A turn to ubuntu in African feminist thought allows us to begin to attend to this and other concerns (Diouf et al. 2023).

Ubuntu and Women's Indigenous Knowledge

A shift, to not just women's knowledge, but also women's indigenous knowledge in relation to ubuntu is echoed in Bernedette Muthien's (2021) writing. She defines ubuntu as compassion, love, trust, and respect, feeling with, feeling for captured in the affirmation, "I am because I belong, I am because I care; or I care and belong therefore I am," put in direct contrast to Rene Descartes's rationalist *cogito ergo sum,* "I think therefore I am" (2021, 68–69). In this sense, for Muthien, the individual who belongs and cares is distinct from rationalist individualism because their personhood is defined within a matriarchal rather than patriarchal community. She situates the above attributes of ubuntu within the project of rematriation—a structure that "retools culture in terms of matriarchal giving" (61). Although the knowledge that Muthien presents here is cisgender, I prefer to position it as womxn's knowledge since the cosmological posture of this paper in relation to ubuntu (where the sacred and spirit are concerned) recognizes the fluidity of gender and societal relationality. Furthermore, I suggest we situate this knowledge within matrilineal lineages making a connection to ancestral genealogies and the stories of our foremothers.[6]

In her work, Tamale is similarly concerned with recentering Afrofeminists' use of ubuntu in their struggles against Eurocentrism and patriarchy. Tamale interprets the African worldview, and by extension ubuntu, as a connection between ecology and community, with the emphasis on "our relationship with

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the natural environment, with our ancestors (spiritual lineage) and with the animal world in our quest for harmony" (2020, 213). Without diminishing the significance of Tamale's link between women and community within ubuntu, her larger focus is decolonization through African feminist subjectivity and thus human-to-human relations toward decolonization. Similarly, Muthien is interested in the inclusion and centering of women's struggles toward "post-patriarchal egalitarianism" at the level of human-to-human relations (2021, 74). Muthien's and Tamale's arguments focus on women and community while also suggesting possibilities beyond this. It is the potentialities these African feminist scholars gesture toward that I am presently building and expanding upon.

The more-than-human, that is central to my thinking, is about exploring the edge of the human toward expansive possibility. It is akin to what Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* articulates as "undoing a definition of the human, which is so tangled in separation and domination that it is consistently making our lives incompatible with the planet" (9). This "undoing," I argue, recognizes the fluidity between the categories of human being and other beings thus collapsing the notion of separation. Gumbs's meditative work begins by drawing in a collective breath between the undrowned (descendants of those who drowned in the Middle Passage), marine mammals, and finally the whole planet as an act of "inter-species communion" (15). Gumbs insists that we can learn from aquatic mammals, who know so well how not to drown, how to love, and how to reconstitute life, community, and relations. Foremost, what marine mammals teach us is *love* which ought to be the foundation of relation, in line with the tradition of love and the erotic of our feminist forebearers (hooks 1999; Lorde 1984). I want to argue that drawing on this relationality will invariably require that we make the connection beyond the human to see our intertwined relations, interdependence, and collective futures. To this end, love and the erotic enable a "collective engagement . . . elaborating . . . we need each other's yearnings, sensibilities and company to assist in this most difficult task of living sovereign lives" (Alexander 2007, 166). Indeed, and I echo Alexander, this is part of "our deep desire to re-imagine and re-envision a loving freedom" (166).

The works of Alexander, McFadden, and Kinyanjui go further as they offer possibilities for a connection between feminist subjectivity and the more-than-human. They do this by establishing indigenous informed women's/womxn's knowledge as a source while also adopting a relationality that attends to colonialism, patriarchy, and the marginalization of women. They engage the body through an acknowledgment of ancestral, ecological, and cosmological relations and responsibilities. In addressing embodied practices of the Sacred, ecological care, and utu, these three feminist scholars and forebearers have allowed me to further engage ubuntu in its more expansive posture and to gesture toward possibilities of emancipation and healing through relational embodiment and entanglement.

Relational Embodiment, Entanglement, and the Sacred

Drawing on Lwa and Orisha cosmologies, Caribbean feminist thinker Alexander decidedly rests her writing within what she calls the Sacred. Alexander revisits postcolonial feminism to push back on its fixation with the material manifestations of neoliberal patriarchal systems of power by introducing sacred subjectivity. While the spiritual posture of Alexander (2015) is situated in the Caribbean and the United States, and the experiences from within these spaces, her conceptualization of the Sacred is clearly abreast with ubuntu and its cosmological underpinnings and sentiment. The current reading of Alexander is intended as an invitation for an expansive reading of diasporic spiritualities which consciously or unconsciously share complementary threads and connection. We can thus read across the currents, moving from one shore to the other, emulating the relational expectations of ubuntu philosophy as situated in the diaspora.

To shed light on Alexander's Sacred echoes of ubuntu, I will first unpack the concept of *umuntu* within ubuntu. When we trace the onto-epistemological narrative of the being, what emerges is that once a person is born and acknowledged by their relations and ancestors, their membership into the world of the living and connection to the ancestors is fortified through ritual performance.[7] Throughout life and upon passing, our life is deliberated upon by those who have lived with us, and if it is approved of, they facilitate our transition into ancestorhood, which is the ultimate completion of personhood (Ogude 2018). *Ukubuyiswa*, a ceremony that welcomes a deceased member into the fold of the family as an ancestor is the "integration back into the family as spirit through a ritual ceremony—a direct translation meaning 'to return'" (Magoqwana 2021, 91). The ceremony entails having the entire family go through a process of cleansing and healing that facilitates in renewing relation with the ancestor. Such a ceremony and the expected conduct are considered isintu (Tembe 2020) and when followed accordingly facilitate *right* relation.[8]

In instances where deep violence has been done, such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, there is a need for reconstituting relation, knowledge, embodied practices, as well as remembering through engagement with the Sacred. Alexander (2005) sets out in *Pedagogies of Crossing* to expand the horizons of knowledge by paying considerable attention to the Sacred and situating her scholarship directly within it. Her contribution is to develop the Sacred by illustrating that those who are forcibly made to cross the Atlantic into the New World remain connected to their cosmologies as descendants of Africans. These cosmologies extend relation to the enslaved, Ancestors, and ecosystems of land, water, and mountains (295).[9] These are what I call "entangled relations." The Sacred, the location of Alexander's work, is related to the Ancestral and is intertwined with the quotidian where the Sacred is negotiated. In the crossing, which is the Transatlantic Slave Trade, people traveled with their pantheon of gods to where

they were forced to lay loose roots in foreign land. When they arrived these gods recognized land, rivers, mountains, and they established themselves. Even the crossing, Alexander tells us, is not done without the gods. What transpires is that the Ancestors, in a deep relational engagement with the living, hide until they can be reached on their own terms, and through a logic that resides outside the Eurocentric epistemology. The expectations of these Ancestors, I argue, are that they are related to through ritual practices that can allow them to undergo healing, and in turn they enable healing for the living.

In the process of transitioning, what Alexander calls crossing, an Ancestor named Kitsimba insists that her story is told on her terms. From her position in the academy, Alexander narrates her process of learning how to listen to Kitsimba tell her story in her own words. In this way a new relationship is forged, and importantly, the source of its knowledge is steeped in indigenous healing knowledge of Lwa and Orisha as it is practiced in the diaspora. Alexander is intimately concerned with the practical work of knowing Ancestors through this lens and she makes us see the connections that outlive generational crossing, trauma, and bondage, as well as a how to develop them into writing.

The project of writing the memory of Kitsimba is akin to what literary scholar Saidiya Hartman (2008) coins *critical fabulation*. It is a method that crafts a narrative of a life from traces of the figure caught in the distortion of colonial/slave archives. Deploying critical fabulation together with "spiritualized consciousness," borrowed from Donna Daniels (1997), Alexander engages in deep communion with Kitsimba in her spiritual work and writing (2005, 300). Alexander walks us through her initial use of Eurocentric methods that veil Kitsimba who only becomes visible once Alexander uses spiritual consciousness to know her. Ultimately, for Alexander, we learn from Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) that politics is not effective without a spiritualized consciousness which captures accurately what the personal and spiritual form in union (285).

Through her project Alexander calls for us to continue our work through interdependence on one another, or "interbeing," which is a conscious and active dependence. Alexander insists that, as women, "We have to unlearn an impulse that allows mythologies about each other to replace knowing about one another. We need to cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, psychic, and spiritual marked attention on each other" (2005, 269). "We cannot," she emphasizes, "afford to cease yearning for each other's company." This is part of a deep process of re-membering after intentional systems and violence of forgetting have been imposed (269). Alexander echoes an ubuntu sentiment when she speaks of "the source of yearning [as] the deep knowing that we are in fact interdependent—neither separate nor autonomous." Going on she points out that, "As human beings, we have a sacred connection to one another" and that "enforced separation wreaks havoc on our Souls" (282). Alexander thus learns from those before her the tools to break mythologies of separation so she can yearn for and desire interdependence. The expansive

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entanglements of relational beings outlined above in ubuntu and the Sacred are always embodied—enacted in and through the body.

The Expansive Body

The importance of ceremonies informed by relationality such as ukubuyiswa and coming to know an ancestor like Kitsimba is healing. A central part of this healing is done through the body. It is important to point to the avenue for healing because of its potential to recognize the history of ubuntu within humanist discourse, acknowledge its influence upon African and diasporic feminisms, and distinguish the ways in which feminists are deliberate about expanding subjectivity in ways that reflect ubuntu more closely. For Alexander, she does this through embodying relationality with Kitsimba, and for McFadden and Kinyanjui, this is done in relation with an inclusive collective self-care. Engaging and expanding on these, I argue that the embodied praxis of memory and healing undertaken through the mediation of the body—that must know itself in relation to other bodies before relationality is established—is distinct from the body that labors for ubuntu at the behest of the state. Subjectivity is thus formed by insisting on connection and relation as foundational to being such that umuntu is imagined expansively.

In her work on the Sacred, Alexander is guided by what her Madrina (godmother) teaches her that, "You have to know who walks with you" (2005, 300). In this way, she makes a methodological and epistemological shift to praxis. Knowing and writing Kitsimba requires active remembering which is done through the body. Alexander explains that "requirements [by the Ancestor] are transposed onto the body, one of these requirements is to remember their source and purpose" (297). Going on she writes, "the body . . . becomes a site of memory, not a commodity for sale, even as it is simultaneously insulated in the nexus of power" (297). Within spiritual praxis, she notes, however, "the tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body" (297). This means the body carries memories in it, as a vessel of the past, and that in addition, certain ceremonies are needed to access these pasts. What is more, I argue, is that while the corporeal body is what undergoes healing, it is but part of a cyclic and infinite transitioning.

It is the body that is tasked with mediating the needs of the Ancestor and Alexander undertakes this body praxis. In this context "embodiment functions as a pathway to knowledge, a talking book, whose intelligibility relies on the social—the spiritual expertise of a community to decode Sacred knowledge, since it is inconceivable to think about the Lwa or Orisha descending without a message to the collectivity gathered in their presence" (2005, 298). To know Kitsimba Alexander must know herself and recognize that she is connected through Sacred ritual to those who are around her and those who have come before her. She needs to acknowledge the interconnectedness that binds these

relations. This is because Kitsimba does not exist as an isolated individual, and furthermore, her story has not been told on her terms, something that in this context is only possible if she guides it. The body therefore does the work that spiritual consciousness and spiritual labor requires.

Alexander's embodied pathways to knowledge point to the body as able to express or enable something as fluid as memory—the memory of an enslaved Ancestor who shares in a manner that demands recognition in ways that are refused by colonial logic or the academy. Such struggles with power are also negotiated by women in relation to the state and lead to reimagining relations to others and self.

Self-Care Beyond the State

The importance of ubuntu is evident in feminist critique of the state, rationalism, and patriarchy. McFadden and Kinyanjui both highlight the significance of women's move from the state and academy to interconnectedness between women occupying different positions, women and the self, the body, and ecology. McFadden's theory of contemporary feminism, for example, presents a radical break from the state to re-envision ubuntu and future freedoms (2016). Contemporary feminism offsets the national project that is entering itself into a neoliberal global network and shifts the focus to an ecofeminist embodied praxis. It is from these relations that I argue McFadden creates room for a contemporary feminism, itself a form of knowledge. Kinyanjui is similarly concerned with relational knowledge and care for self, focusing on how working women create and negotiate their lives through what she terms feminine utu or utu feminism, pushing ubuntu towards a more generative path.[10]

Both feminist theory-praxes are important to reflect on postapartheid South Africa's TRC, a national initiative that used ubuntu (couched in the Christian doctrine of forgiveness) as a reconciliatory mediator between those who operated within its principles (the Black majority) and the perpetrators of heinous crimes under the apartheid regime. This restorative justice process was meant to appeal to the humanity of family members, friends, and the community of mainly Black South Africans who had lost loved ones at the hands of apartheid operatives. The 'expectation of forgiveness' bellied in the concept of ubuntu did no more than humanize the perpetrators at the expense of abantu.[11] Although the broader call to forgive was directed at abantu, the onus of hospitality, forgiveness, and its labor was primarily expected of women (Driver 2005). This has led African feminists like Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2017) to consider the embodied role of women in the TRC and critically engage the notion of forgiveness.

In her critique of the postcolonial state, McFadden describes it as heteronormative feudo-patriarchal neoliberal and neocolonial and therefore not fully severed from the body of the imperial and colonial construct (2016; 2018, 420). She argues it is sustained and fostered by elites who though they only benefit

a few nonetheless continue to seek and strengthen the hold of outside influence. What manifests is a Fanonian consciousness of the pitfalls of nationalism where an elite who fought against the colonial system later uphold it and risk exploitation (Fanon 1963).

A counter mechanism to the state is care for the self, which Kinyanjui emphasizes, germinates from a neglect of the self informed by a "patriarchy [that] is not interested in my self-care and so loving myself is one way to counter the structure" (2019, 11). She sheds light not just on the state but also on the failures of academia to take seriously the concerns and agency of women in the urban market system that is caught up in the neoliberal complex. Her alternative, utu knowledge, she contends, "preserves and transfers women's logic, norms and values of nurturing, care, creating solidarities and commons, intergenerational connectedness and transfer of knowledge and resources to communities and across generations. It counters the exploitative global patriarchal capitalism knowledge" (3). Through an utu logic and desire for wellbeing issuing from women's indigenous knowledge and labor and affecting persons and their relations, we see a level of negotiated agency being proposed to counter state and patriarchal frameworks.

Not wanting to overlook women's role in upholding patriarchy, McFadden argues that women activists and resistors too have been caught in the nationalist rhetoric and even accommodating patriarchy by working for the African state. This, however, has been more to their detriment than advantage. The price women pay within such a state is that they remain subordinates who can only be custodians of patriarchy in the hope that they can hold on to this position with its precarious rewards. It may allow women partial relief from the domestic space; however, it offers them no freedom. Of significance is that women in this space are expected to uphold traditional roles (Dyer 2018) and thus McFadden observes, women are unable to go "beyond the nationalist moment" (2018, 425).

Both working and peasant women, McFadden insists, suffer the most, lacking even basic necessities and facing the greatest harm from the perpetuation of patriarchal, hypermasculine, cisgender, and cishet institutions. This is a current reality because, as Tamale succinctly puts it, "Several institutions around the continent continue to reflect masculine and imperial/modernist ideals that place the majority of citizens at the periphery of existence. These include statecraft, government rationality and social organizations (e.g., the family)" (2020, 9).

Not exempting herself, Kinyanjui acknowledges that she holds an elite position against working-class women, and she connects these women's lives with her own explaining that the "academy is laced with patriarchal capitalist norms and values which aim at transforming women from the margins into patriarchal capitalists by positioning them into global financial, labour and commodity value chains" (2019, 1). This positioning, she argues, "demands that women shed off their . . . utu knowledge and adopt masculine knowledge systems as pathways to empowerment and liberation" (1). Kinyanjui (2014) thus turns

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her attention to working-class women who in the urban city make a living for themself through utu feminism.

We should acknowledge here that women have always taken a lead in the economy of society. Nwando Achebe (2020), for example, demonstrates this in her historical account of elite women who are situated within spiritual, political, and social power structures as agents. Another example from ubuntu is evident in small-owned business enterprises led by women in South Africa who conduct business through its principles (Mmope 2020). It is significant that women have seen ubuntu principles as worthwhile in their institutions and struggles as the philosophy of ubuntu is not itself anti-woman (Tamale 2020; Oelofsen 2018). Through ubuntu/utu feminism, what emerges is that working-class women generate counter knowledge steeped in ubuntu/utu relationality amidst everyday struggles imposed upon them. Within such work is an awareness for not just care for other women but also self-care.

In her response to the restraints of the nationalist project, McFadden leaves the upper strata of society for the mountains of Eswatini to practice contemporary feminism. As a theoretical contribution with a praxis orientation, it is meant to inform the daily lives of women through: insisting they are born with everything they need, and as such dignified; undertaking a brave and complete break with a neoliberal, neocolonial agenda that has women collaborating (sometimes unwillingly) with patriarchy; forming solidarity among women of different paths who face patriarchal heteronormative toxic masculine cisgender cishet domination; and radically thinking about pleasure. McFadden emphasizes that, "as women, we become invincible at the moment when we embrace and translate our sense of integrity into political and ethical discourse and activism" (2018, 427). Her clarion call is that we come into this world with our integrity intact.

This knowing that we are already whole informs a theme and process of healing laced across McFadden's writing. It is placed at the center in ways that, for instance, the TRC in South Africa could not do. This is because contemporary feminism offsets the national project that is emerging into a neoliberal global network. The focus is shifted onto the body, wellbeing, health, and healing of women through self-care. I argue this as an important point because often we expect a patriarchal system to accommodate and go beyond itself to heal, and in so doing, overlook women who do this for themselves and among one another. The patriarchal state inevitably fails to undertake the task of healing because the ideas of man and woman entrenched the state formation and law in most African states finds its logic from the Western doctrine (Oyěwùmí 1997). From the relations outlined in contemporary feminism and utu feminism knowledge can be formed and reconstituted, thus presenting a radical counter narrative to the nationalist rhetoric that follows ubuntu. Moreover, thinking alongside the idea of self-care I want to suggest that our level of self-care can be a measure for attending to the relational being who

recognizes that they are part of a continuum. What this entails is that caring for the self is attending to the ancestral—to those who came before—and to connections with the ecological.

In Eswatini, McFadden makes the radical shift by becoming a practitioner of self-care, reordering relations between herself and her neighbors (who she was initially separated from by class), and her relationship to the land which shapes and mediates her engagement to it and her neighbors. Such work is important since women are often denied self-care and in place of it required to work for the family, or the nationalist project. Further, each of us, Alexander argues, must work to "unearth [the] desire to belong to the self in community, as part of a radical project that is not to be confused with preoccupations with the self" (2005, 282). Where solutions are concerned, utu feminism we have seen, is positioned as a feminist charged philosophy countering the idea that it is a male-led ideal performed by female bodies. Instead, it is a solution to the toxic hypermasculine patriarchy of the state and society at large. It invests agency in women who choose to self-govern and regulate in anti-imperialist ways. It proves there is a generative philosophy and praxis we can. McFadden, Kinyanjui, and Alexander clearly invite us to rest into our own being, connect to place, to land, to one another, and to the Ancestors who influence our work and writing.[12]

Beyond the Anthropocene: Relational Healing and the More-Than-Human

A significant aspect of healing and imagining future possibilities with self and others can be traced in how we choose to relate. In this process we must break open the Anthropocene to diffuse forms of being in which the human body is only a vessel for a more encompassing approach to relationality.

For McFadden, the process of healing begins once she is in relation with her neighbors, the animals, plants, land, and water she lives with. Actively countering the structures that be, McFadden tells us that she translates what she feels and intuits alongside planting her own garden and being grateful for "the source of nature's power" (2018, 427). The counter work which also repairs relations with her working-class neighbors entails literally living close to "nature's power of life"—repositioning power relations women are engaged in and offering a way of seeing their agency. McFadden shows appreciation for land that allows her to harvest food, and to find an equilibrium between, she says, "earth's nurturing capacity and my own ability to live simply, quietly, and wholesomely" (427). The proximity to earth's nurturing and a simple life point to what informs self-care for her.

This is different to the relationship the Anthropocene articulates on the connection to the human and posthuman. Concerned with an ubuntu that is inclusive of the more-than-human, Evan Mwangi (2019) explains that ubuntu contributes to "making a posthuman ethics that sees the world as having a

complexity beyond anthropocentric interest" (31). With a similar concern, Cajetan Iheka (2021), for instance, coins the term African Ecomedia to evoke instances where African media technologies are in a relationship of entanglement with environmental degradation connected to larger networks of extraction and consumption between Africa and Euro-America (5).[13] Significantly, Iheka aligns African Ecomedia with Kathryn Yusoff's "Black Anthropocenes" to directly address African subjects who are objectified and rendered invisible (7). Another scholar, Lesley Le Grange (2012), holds the view that connecting human and more-than-human entities is their shared suffering. She argues that critical posthumanism has a particular resonance with ubuntu as both are normative ethical concepts concerned with interconnectedness.[14] However, the central figure in this thread of thinking remains the human who is put in the position of being the agent of relationality while the more-than-human is acted upon, in that the ethical responsibility lies on humans, while other living beings are not afforded this consciousness. In other words, humans are affected by the environment, but we are the only beings who can act ethically—orcas for example, can't act ethically.[15] Humans, from this position, remain the agents of ethics, and ethics remain solely the prerogative of humans.

While these foci on the animal and Ecomedia are closer to the contribution of this paper, I would further add that the entanglement of relationships we constantly negotiate are concerned with the ancestors, spirits, unborn, abantu, communities, and ecosystems, and embodied in practices that integrate and acknowledge these expansive connections. A clear example of such interwoven relation is McFadden's idea of sufficiency—a state of having enough so that one can maintain a "balanced relationship with the earth and other living ecosystems" (2018, 427). This is done in conjunction with her neighbors with whom she begins to form a new coexistence that extends to the community, the land, and care for herself as a woman. The land over time is molded and coaxed to grow nourishing food, healing herbs, and calling on birds. More significantly, the land shapes relations and requires McFadden to adapt her life and relationship to her neighbors through it. We could insist that, there is no relation, and certainly no *right* relation without the land as mediator and influence upon human living.

It is noteworthy that McFadden locates the consciousness and experience of freedom in the process of growing organic food. This she describes as a real-location of site. This is a vegan and ecofeminist location which she states allows for a reimagining of life-scapes. McFadden creates this space by spending time building relationships with herself and this eco-community. In remote Eswatini, women subsistence farmers challenge the nationalist discourse that connects them to "Mother Earth" or idealizes them through the Mother Africa Trope (Stratton 1994). They are instead agents of relationality.[16] The connections between each relationship formed and actively sustained is a clear indication that relationality is an act extended outside the bracket of humans.

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If we situate ourselves within McFadden's *contemporary feminism*, we can bring our attention to the internal dynamics of self, one that involves pleasuring, nourishing, cleansing, supporting, and dignifying the body. Additionally, we can make space to accommodate our interconnectedness with the more-than-human, re-evaluating our relationship to land, while not overlooking the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Indeed, it is not possible for umuntu to reside or rest without the presence of land. In other words, without streams, rivers, mountains, caves, animals, trees, forests, or medicines, umuntu is robbed of full relationality afforded by ubuntu. McFadden has us see how the macro-patriarchal systems can be countered by micro acts of radical resistance of self-care, and more importantly the relational care mediated and required of us by the land lived with alongside others. Kinyanjui reframes women's subjectivity from a radical self-care perspective within the concept of utu feminism which generates a direct relation between African feminist thinking and ubuntu. And Alexander accentuates that our knowing is always an act of desiring relation and toward healing across time and space.

Gesturing Beyond

What I have tried to emphasize throughout this paper is that where ubuntu and women's knowledge are concerned, healing is often a calling. It is required because our ancestors "long for integration (ukubuyiswa) in how we know what we know" (Magoqwane 2021, 91). As relational beings, we are therefore responsible for what we know and who this knowledge comes from. We are also responsible for tracing, hearing, sharing, and protecting this knowledge (often suppressed and marginalized) long after those who held it have departed. To hold all this in one breath is to acknowledge our expansive complexity. This should awaken us to the realization that the human and more-than-human are in closer proximity than we care to acknowledge—they are intertwined, interrelated, and entangled. As we undertake integration (ukubuyiswa) with our foremothers' knowledge, we should also connect with our broader ancestry who move their bodies towards healing, resisting, and loving across the ocean and otherworlds.

Further, in the process of reintegration with otherbeings and otherworlds, the body is a vessel that can only control how it relates to the rest of the transitional dynamic of the living, ancestor, and unborn. The body may require healing for the being to heal. This can only be done through acknowledging interdependence with otherbeings—more-than-human beings. Care for this body and self also connect us to the greater continuum and umuntu's impact on the planet tells us more about how we are affected and changed by our more-than-human relations by bringing umuntu's focus back into the larger cosmological fold of being and becoming. Through these relations is how we dream new liberations of collective futures.

Unifier Hazel Tshimangadzo Dyer *is a lecturer in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Their research interests are Black diaspora studies, literature of the sacred, healing epistemologies and praxis, speculative futures, and Black geographies and ecologies. Her writing is published in* Agenda *and* Africa is a Country *and she is co-editor of* Ubuntu and the Everyday *(2019).*

Notes

1. The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

2. Some examples are *Hunhu* from Zimbabwe (Sibanda 2014), *utu* in Swahili (Kresse 2011), and *Ho'oponopono*, a Hawaiian indigenous practice of reconciliation and forgiveness (Simeona 1989).

3. Ubuntu is not capitalized in this paper to acknowledge its everyday use. See: Ogude, James and Unifier Dyer, eds. 2019. *Ubuntu and the Everyday in Africa.* Trenton: Africa World Press.

4. We can think of praxis as "a theory in the flesh . . . where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (Moraga 2015, 19).

5. The communitarianism discourse has caused a rift with some intellectuals who juxtaposed it against Eurocentric individualism. Kwame Gyeke (1997) for instance, opted to find a middle ground which he calls moderate communitarianism. There are also those like Rianna Oelofsen (2018) who use the distinction of Afro-communitarianism to offer a logic that is more compatible with indigenous philosophies like ubuntu.

6. The idea of matrilineal lineages developed over a summer gathering on August 9, 2022, with the Decoloniality Dialogues Collective facilitated by Unifier Dyer under the title "Matrilineal Lineages Conversation with Angie Sanchez and Michaela B-Smith."

7. Each deed or utterance is monitored, rewarded, or rectified, and always judged according to very strict moral principles developed over eons (Ramose 1999). Notably, to have ubuntu is to be *exceptional* in acts and deeds of generosity, kindness, and willingness to go to great extents to help. Ubuntu is thus concerned with how persons relate to one another for the benefit of the individual, the community, and society at large. Within this logic, society is made up of a wide variety of beings and entities who are persons too, even though they may not have the characteristics of human beings (Mwangi 2019, 13). Umuntu, as opposed to human, does not exist outside of their cosmos and environment and at any given time they are relating with a variety of entities. These may be their ancestors, deities, benevolent or monovalent spirits that dwell or take the form of other persons, trees, animals, rivers, lightning, and even words uttered. Ubuntu, therefore, does not only translate to material aspects of being but spiritual ones too and is not fully realized in the material realm but rather, in the spiritual or unseen realm where it is completed by the transition of umuntu to ancestor. The principles of ubuntu that umuntu is required to live by are in their very nature idealistic and intended to be so, however they are not unrealistic. Rather, they are constantly practiced in relational entanglements and reiterated through oral aesthetics (Peterson 2019).

8. The root ntu in both ubuntu and *isintu* exists in most cultural/philosophical/linguistic variants of ubuntu, such as *utu* from Swahili (Kresse 2011) and *hunhu* from Shona (Sibanda 2014). The root *utu* encompasses a holistic embodiment of beings. See Ramose (2003) on utu and his challenge of rendering it as humanism.

9. Ancestors is capitalized following M. Jacqui Alexander's capitalization of it.

10. Kinyanjui uses both feminine utu and utu feminism interchangeably. In this paper, utu feminism will be used to connect more closely to the theoretical and activist elements rather than gendering.

11. For information on the social, linguistic, and ontological distinction between people/abantu and white people/abeLungu, see: Mtenyana, Buntu. 1986. "ubuntu abantu abeLungu." *Black Sash*, February 1986.

12. On rest as resistance, see: Hersey, Tricia. 2022. *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*. New York: Little, Brown Spark. See also Emilie Diouf et al. (2023) on how to think of care beyond the academy (39).

13. Iheka defines Ecomedia as meeting the following criteria: "their infrastructural logic produces fire and/or other toxins that contaminate elemental media (including air, water, earth); they critique human exploitative relationships with the environment, and where possible propose strategies for eco-restoration. Ecomedia processes catalyze ecological consequences in the form of environmental degradation and/or advocacy for environmental awareness, renewal, and sustainability, making this media genre an assemblage of natural elements and cultural attributes with apparent superstructures and implicit infrastructures" (6).

14. Le Grange builds upon Bradiotti's critical posthumanism which "aims to develop affirmative perspectives on . . . productive potential of the (post)human predicament" (2012, 49).

15. We have seen of late water beings attacking oil ships whose content poses a threat to oceanic ecosystems.

16. McFadden importantly revives a long-stigmatized relationship between women and medicinal plants—their power as alchemist, herbalist, and chemist. Women have always been deep knowers of domestic and wild plants and used their properties with expertise. See Gabeba Baderoon's 2018 keynote speech: Afems African Feminism Conference. 2018. "The Mute Always Speak": (Re)imagining and Re-imagining Feminist Futures." YouTube video, 1:18:24, Nov. 21, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo1qb_ejyPA&t=12s.

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