

Ubuntu Orality as a Living Philosophy

by

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Abstract

It is not the intention of the author to create a false dichotomy about Blackness; rather it is his aim to enter the contemporary Black academic discourse with another form of remembering. The author's remembering is grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, which has found constancy through language and other social symbolic expressions. This cultural transmission process has allowed knowledge from the author's ancestors to cascade down to him. Yet, the author is also aware that there are other stories that have not yet found voice. So the author speaks with the hope and aim of leaving room for others to express their philosophical truths as our forbearers have done for us. This being said, the author conveys that the power of Black knowledge production has been taken up as anything else except as the intellectual creation of Black people. It is therefore not surprising that such neo-colonial actions continued up to today, still undermine the will of all Black children to engage in Black knowledge production. This neo-colonial reality of hatred which is directed towards Blackness undermines the new generation of Black children's willingness to engage their Blackness. As the global neo-colonial ideologies make Black children doubt their Blackness it is our Black children, who start to doubt their true Black power. To lose Black power is to lose our ancestral homeland of Africa and without Africa there is no real substantial Black power. So to contest and combat the undermining of Blackness the author will engage one of the forms of Black knowledge production which the descendants of the old Ubuntu nations call Ubuntu Orality. This paper will highlight the ancestral experiences of Blackness which is Ubuntu knowledge. Other Africans in different geopolitical locations have expressed their Ubuntu consciousness as Pan- Africanism as conveyed by Marcus Garvey and Afro-centricity as expressed by Molefi Kete Asante. This is evidence that this knowledge is stored in our genetic memory; which means that when we share our memories of our Blackness we help each other re-member our "Urbuntuness". Elders, Mothers, Fathers, Brothers and Sisters let us use our storied engagements to reclaim our histories so that we may use that which is good for our journey into the future. Sankofa, Sankofa, Sankofa.¹

The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds... Orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from “here,” which affects how what is “there” appears, how it represents itself (p. 8). So what is “East” is actually what is east of the prime meridian, the zero point of longitude. The East as well as the left is thus oriented; it requires its direction only by taking a certain point of view as given (p. 14). The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there (p. 15).

-Sara Ahmed (2006, pp. 8, 14, 15)

If orientations are about how we begin then I want to point out that in my decolonizing process I purposefully take Ubuntu theory as the given starting point that shapes how my storytelling gives us a more culturally situated picture about the Ubuntu worldview. As part of centering Ubuntu, I use a discursive theoretical framework because it allows me to engage my many political arenas. A good example of this is highlighted in the way that I use the anti-colonial theory of Aime Cesaire to highlight what colonialism is in the Ubuntu context, which then allows me to enter the Ubuntu worldview in a more meaningful way. The key concepts that I use to address the Ubuntu worldview are Ubuntu as a people; Ubuntu as a theory; Ubuntu epistemology; Ubuntu honouring theory and Africana phenomenology theory.

Aime Cesaire’s anti-colonial theoretical work, entitled *Discourse on Colonialism*, serves to illustrate how the colonial institutions were justified and how this justification continues to be perpetuated. The most important function of his work is that it serves to deconstruct the false memory that colonialism is still trying to impose on me. Cesaire reminds me what colonialism is with this poem:

My turn to state an equation: colonization = "thingification." I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about "achievements," diseases cured, improved standards of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out. They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks. I am talking about thousands of men sacrificed to the Congo-Ocean." I am talking about those who, as I write this, are digging the harbor of Abidjan by hand. I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life—from life, from the dance, from wisdom. I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies. They dazzle me with the tonnage of cotton or cocoa that has been exported, the acreage that has been planted with olive trees or grapevines. I am talking about natural economies that have been disrupted—harmonious and viable economies adapted to the indigenous population—about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries; about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials.

They pride themselves on abuses eliminated. I too talk about abuses, but what I say is that on the old ones—very real—they have superimposed others—very detestable. They talk to me about local tyrants brought to reason; but I note that in general the old tyrants get on very well with the new ones, and that there has been established between them, to the detriment of the people, a circuit of mutual services and complicity. (Cesaire, 2000, p.42-43)

In this short, accessible, clear poem, Cesaire makes plain what so many theories and academics have failed to communicate in clear accessible language. In the Black context, Cesaire communicates to all that colonialism is the gaining of power through Black dispossession. Black dispossession was hidden and silenced by White concept of discovery, as is illustrated in the case of Cecil John Rhodes who in colonial society “created” Rhodesia after “discovering” the territory. How did Cecil John Rhodes accomplish such a feat? How did he make so many nations and people disappear so that he could claim discovery of a country using the concept of terra nullius? How could Cecil John Rhodes claim terra nullius when he had to contend with the resistance of our ancestors? To get African lands he had to use trickery, bribery, outright theft and killed our ancestors without fear of consequence because he and his countrymen had convinced themselves that they were dealing with primitive people. Curtis Cook and Juan D. Lindau, in *Aboriginal Rights and Self-Government: The Canadian and Mexican Experience in North American Perspective*, convey how the principal of primitiveness was conceptualized in Rhodesia as a colonial tool of dispossession that used vague and arbitrary standards:

By the second decade of the twentieth century, British colonial law had come to rely on a presumptive division of the world into “civilized” and “primitive” in order to justify unilateral assertions of sovereignty by colonists. Seminal for this version was the 1919 decision in *Re: Southern Rhodesia* of the Law Lords of the Privy Council of Great Britain, the highest judicial authority in the Empire. (2000, p. 151)

Curtis Cook and Juan D. Lindau show that the White colonizers developed their tools of colonialism and conquest among a specific Indigenous people in a specific geographic location and then transported those colonial techniques to other geopolitical locations. The White colonizing techniques were always being refined before being passed on to their kith and kin. Cesaire reports how White colonialists eased their consciences about the evil things they did to Black people by saying that our “good backward nature” was somehow responsible for encouraging them to colonize us. Cesaire captures this point when he makes the following reference:

Since, the Rev. Tempels notes with obvious satisfaction, ‘from their first contact with the white men, the Bantu considered us from the only point of view that was possible to them, the point of view of their Bantu philosophy’ and ‘integrated us into their hierarchy of life forces at a very high level’. (2000, p. 59)

Rev. Tempels generated his racist remarks by distorting Ubuntu philosophy and making it seem like Black people could not distinguish between White people and Gods. To adequately address the racist distortion created by the Rev. Tempels, let me use Ubuntu theory. The Ubuntu philosophy teaches us that we should treat a stranger like a god because we will never know when we may find ourselves in their territory. It is hoped by treating a stranger like a god, one will receive the same treatment when away from home. So Ubuntu courtesy and hospitality became the marker of Ubuntu ignorance in the eyes of the colonizers and today this legacy still haunts us. Fearing being labelled as backward and primitive, we have abandoned our Ubuntu ways but, if we are to know ourselves as Ubuntu, we must take our power (Ubuntu) and use it to struggle to determine who we are and where we are going. All Ubuntu life is connected by the cycle of reciprocal relationships; no relationship is greater than the other. I value my relationship with my family in the same manner I value the trees, waters, rocks and other animals. Each relationship I have sustains my life in a balance that is beyond my creation. Sankofa, Sankofa, Sankofa, I am going back to reclaim my past so I can go forward. Brothers and Sisters will you take this journey with me? So let us engage who the Ubuntu are as a people.

Ubuntu as a People

The term Ubuntu has a linguistic history among Black people in Africa. Yet not all Black people identify as being Ubuntu. This I believe shows that Ubuntu is a reflection of one contextual expression of Blackness and does not undermine other expressions of Blackness. The amaZulu of South Africa refer to a person as Muntu and people as Ubuntu. The Shona people of Zimbabwe call a person Munhu and they refer to people as Vanhu. The Chichewa people of Malawi refer to a person as Munthu and people as Watu. I highlight these three examples as a way of showing that Black people have been self-identifying as Ubuntu since time immemorial. The Zulu high priest, Credo Vusa'mazulu Mutwa (1969) in *My People, My Africa*, tells us that:

The Black people of Africa called themselves, and any other people on earth, the Bantu, Watu or Abantu. This loosely means “people” or “human beings”. People of Europe and parts of Asia are called Abantu abamhlope, meaning literally “human beings who are white”, while we ourselves Abantu abansundu, or “human beings who are dark brown.” (1969, p. 18)

Mutwa also informs us that the contraction *ntu* in Ubuntu or Muntu has its roots in the word “ntu-tu-ut, which is an onomatopoeic word to describe the steps of a creature walking on two legs instead of four legs” (1969, p. 19). In my 2006 MA thesis, *Revitalizing Memory in Honour of Maseko Ngoni's Indigenous Bantu Governance*, I address our roots in a chapter, which I titled *Origins of Our Ancestors*. In an effort to clearly show how Ubuntu history is Black history, I will revisit some of the points that I made while adding new information.

Stories of sacred memories and modern scholarship are in agreement on the point that the Ubuntu people migrated from a northern direction towards southern Africa. Donald R. Morris, in *The Washing of the Spears*, accepts that the Ubuntu were in Egypt and other parts of north and west Africa but has concluded thus: “No one knows from whence the Bantu came, and by the time modern man turned scientific scrutiny on the problem a century ago, the layer of evidence were irrevocably tangled” (1965, p. 27). On the question of the Ubuntu origin, Donald R. Morris makes the following point: “The origin of the Negroes has been the greatest enigma. The variation within the Cushites, or a combination of Cushites with either Bushmen or Pygmies² has been considered” (1962, p. 12). Hence, the white powers have rendered us invisible by the usage of the term ‘Negroid.’ A Negro is homeless, languageless and cultureless (Malcolm X, 1967). Robert O. Collins, in *Problems in African History* (1968), makes the following claims:

The term Bantu was first coined by Dr. Wilhelm Bleek in a book published in 1862 entitled *A Comparative Grammar of South African languages*. Bleek observed that nearly every language spoken on the southern third of the African continent used prefixes, which could be attributed to a set of what he called “proto- prefixes,” presuming a generic relationship and implying an aboriginal source. (Collins, 1968, p. 57)

I state very forcefully that Bleek did not make a new discovery, he simply reported the knowledge that our ancestors had shared with him. White settler society, with its kith and kin, has made claims of discovery since first contact and they continue to do so at our expense. They have taken up our knowledge as their own and they have been so effective that I even found myself trying to censor my own Baba's teaching because I feared that if his teaching contradicted their writings I would be considered a revisionist. They have created the illusion that it is impossible for us to talk to each other without first talking to them. This is why, Sisters and Brothers, I am saying: Sankofa, Sankofa, Sankofa, I am going back to reclaim my past before the great Maafa.

Cheikh Anta Diop, in *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, accurately summed up the Black truth when he stated that the ancient Egyptians were in fact Black people and these Black people are the ancestors of the Black Southerners. Sanusi (High Priest), philosopher and historian Credo Vusa'maZulu Mutwa has knowledge only available to the chosen few healers and spiritualists. Wisely, he sheds light on the origin of the Ubuntu using the intergenerational knowledge given to him as a custodian of sacred Ubuntu knowledge. He tells us that:

Now the common stock, the ancestral tribe from which all Negroid tribes of Africa sprang, was known as the Ba-Tu, or the Ba-Ntu. Legends say that the stock lived in the “Old Land”. This was far back in the bone and stone ages. Where was this “Old Land”? It is where the “Old Tribes” are still found today- all the tribes of the land of the Bu-Kongo right up to the southern parts of the land of the Ibo and Oyo (Nigeria).

These are the tribes who identify themselves with the prefix Ba. They are Ba-Mileke, Ba-Mbara, Ba-Kongo, Ba-Ganda, Ba-Hatu, Ba-Luba, Ba-Tonka, Ba-Saka, Ba-Tswana, Ba-Kgalaka, Ba-Venda, Ba-Pedi, Ba-Sutu and Ba-Chopi. The southern offshoot of the great- Ba-Pedi, Ba-Venda, Ba-Kgalaka and Ba-Tswana-are the oldest Bantu tribes south of the level of the Limpopo and their histories within these regions go back to a thousand years B.C. All these tribes are direct offshoots of the great Ba-Ntu nations that lived in the “Old Land”, as a properly organised tribe, a full 4500 years ago, reckoned according to the genealogies. (1969, p. 19)

Oral traditions tell us that we have old roots in North Africa as we have been living in these lands since time immemorial. Mutwa’s knowledge about the Olden Ubuntu has been supported by the scientific work of Murdock in his book entitled, *Africa: Its People and Their Culture History* (1959). In this scholarship Murdock identifies most of the olden ethnic groups as having a linguistic foundation to what has been identified as Bantu Languages and, to prove this point, he points out that the olden ethnic groups are more densely populated according to geographic population figures and anthropological evidence. Meaning, the Ubuntu migrated from high density population areas to areas of low density population. The major areas that Murdock identifies as the oldest Ubuntu civilizations are located in the central great lakes areas, which are arguably the oldest Ubuntu civilizations. The next major move was to North Western Africa followed by North Africa while small groups went to southern Africa. Let us now engage the theory of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu Theory

In Western society, Ubuntu was unknown and in most African academic institutions, which function from a Western Eurocentric scholarly worldview, Ubuntu was dismissed as simple African thinking. But the world became interested for a moment when Bill Clinton was quoted speaking at the British Labour party conference in 2006; the BBC reported Bill Clinton as saying “Society is important because of Ubuntu.” The reporter, Sean Coughlan, then plays on the ignorance of his audience by showing that “nobody” knows what this Ubuntu is or cares to know. He states: “But what is it? Left-leaning sudoku? U2's latest album? Fish-friendly sushi?” In between his mockery of Ubuntu he tells his audience that: “Mr. Tutu's identification with ubuntu has given rise to the idea of "ubuntu theology" - where ethical responsibility comes with a shared identity. If someone is hungry, the ubuntu response is that we are all collectively responsible.” Sean Coughlan then makes it clear that even this small idea of Black Africa has been co-opted when he reports that:

Ubuntu has also entered the language of development and fair trade - with campaigners using the word in aid projects for Africa in ways that suggest this will be an African solution for African problems. Ironically, says Rob Cunningham, Christian Aid's programme manager for South Africa, just as the word is taking off in Western society the values it embodies are in decline in the land of its origin.

"In my conversations with partner organisations and the communities they work with, and among older people, there's a deep sense of loss of ubuntu," says Mr Cunningham. "To me, it means sitting down in a Zulu hut in KwaZulu-Natal sharing scarce food and a brew and a few stories." There are ubuntu education funds, ubuntu tents at development conferences, ubuntu villages, an ubuntu university - and it's now the name of an open-source operating system. Expect to hear more from ubuntu in the future. (news.bbc.co.uk)³

The reporter, Sean Coughlan, communicates to us that compulsory able-bodied Whiteness is giving legitimacy to a simple Black idea, while also laughing at the fact that compulsory able-bodied Whiteness is making a big deal out of nothing. So what is Ubuntu from an African context?

Ubuntu is a philosophical theory that guides our action in order to maintain all our relational bonds within an Ubuntu worldview. We need to remember that ideas and philosophies created in one language cannot always be adequately translated into another language without losing some meaning because each language speaks to a specific contextual symbolic encoding. Knowing these language translational limitations, here are some Ubuntu philosophical principles taught to me by my family and community:

- I am a reflection of the existence of my ancestors - I exist because they exist or as we say "Umuntu ngumuntu ngubuntu" – A person is a person through other people or we could also say, 'A thing is a thing through other things.' Meaning all things know each other in relationship to each other.
- We come from the energy flux and are the energy flux. This is why the circle is important to the Ubuntu spirituality. The circle shows that we are one.
- We respect and give thanks for all of our relations because all elements are part of the energy flux that makes up life.
- We try to live Ubuntu life with the aim of finding integrity and wholeness in the balance of nature, which is to see the energy flux in everything.
- To each person, place, animal, or object we ask for permission before taking and give thanks for that which we have received. These prayers are directed to the spirit of the desired object. These prayers explain our actions and give justification for our actions because we respect the spirit of all things.
- Birth and death reflects the life cycle in all things and in all places.
- The spirit of the land and the spirit of the water we honour in special ways. In fact, it is said that the experience we have with specific elements helps us to develop language and knowledge as an effort to respect the space we occupy.
- Our traditional governance institutions are inclusive of nature as a decision making relational member of Ubuntu. We honour the intelligibility of nature.
- We honour the dead because they live in a parallel world to that of the living.

Now that we have some shared meaning of what Ubuntu theory is, let us go deeper and engage the Ubuntu epistemology.

Ubuntu Epistemology

I have learned from my Ubuntu elders to see the spirit of the creator in everything. Paradoxically, I have also been taught to understand that “the creator is distant, unconcerned with the affairs of mankind, except indirectly via animal and spirit emissaries” (Burnham, 2000, p. 2). I am of the creator yet I cannot fully understand my own nature and the rock is of the creator but I cannot speak for it as I do not understand it. In the Ubuntu epistemology, a force that may be perceived as evil in one context may be good in another context and vice versa. This is why we say that we are in a relational cycle with everything on this earth. Our job is to figure out how to nurture that relationship in a specific way and at a specific time. This is why the memory of our ancestors is important to keep alive. To know an ancestor is to invite their spirit to guide you when you need help. We do not need to keep inventing knowledge that was already invented by our ancestors. If we work with our ancestors, we can perfect this knowledge and move forward.

How do we know our ancestors exist? How do we know their spirits are with us? To answer this question my Baba Mukulu (Elder male that I address as big or senior father) once said to me:

I know I exist because you exist. I can see you, I can feel you and I know my mother exist because I am here. I am of her and my father. Both my parents are of their parents. You can see how this relationship connects me with the living dead. Dreaming becomes at times another way to communicate with the dead. Now, would you believe me, if I told you as old as I am that my grandparents visit me in my dreams? Other relatives that I have never met come to me in my dreams and advise me. All dreams are communications. You have to work out the message. (Baba Mukulo, personal communication, 1981-2)

Baba Mukulo's story has helped me make sense of the African epigram, “We exist because they exist”, as he has demonstrated our relational link to our ancestors and how they are central to our practice of spirituality. Our ancestors are still with us in spirit but are a step closer to *Unkulunkulu* (The Great Deviser, The Eternal Spirit or The Creator) who we don't know but experience in all of creation. Others have defined The Eternal Spirit as the known energy in all things and it has also been perceived as the greater source of all energy. Arguably, our inability to comprehend Unkulunkulu has led some of our Ubuntu to represent The Great Deviser in many forms including:

...as bi-sexual, with two heads, one growing out of the top of the other, facing in opposite directions, which again symbolizes that God is all things in all time. In the old days figures of this type were carved at the top of long poles, which were then erected in the centre of the village clearing, to be used to measure the time of day from the shadow they cast. (Mutwa, 1969, p. 133)

The ancestral spirits that we know by name, we pray to them because they can help us. For example, they can inform us about the wishes of Unkulunkulu. Spirits can also be more than just people; the spirits of animals, plants, sacred places and sacred waters can speak to us and advise us. Owen Burnham, in *African Wisdom*, reports that the African world:

...is a world in which wisdom and knowledge are the keys to survival in the multi-dimensional spiritual universe where we are never far from the past, present and the future as represented by the ancestral spirits that are all around us. (2000, p. 12)

Our ancestors are motivated in their actions by their love for us. We are a continuation of their legacy or, put another way, we are a reflection of their existence. Our well-being is their well-being. To pray to them is to communicate with loving parents who know and understand us very well. In the spirit world they are in a better place to understand Unkulunkulu and because they have been here on earth they can understand us.

As we are in a different time dimension from our spiritual ancestors, we cannot see them unless they choose to make contact with us (Burnham, 2000). At times, we can communicate with our ancestors and not be aware of it; like when we feel the world is as it should be, the premonition we get about a dangerous situation that is about to happen or when we feel compelled to communicate with a total stranger. All these unexplained interactions are the results of our ancestors intervening or, at times, not intervening. The Ubuntu world is a mystery and we are taught to respect death without fear because it is a homecoming to our true natural form, which is spirit. In the world of the living we learn lessons and teach lessons but our time in the living world is not determined by us, it is determined by Unkulunkulu (the energy in all things).

In order to honour our spiritual connections and relationships, we offer libations. Before killing for food, we ask through prayer for the animal or plant spirit to give us its flesh. What we receive we are thankful for and, to show our gratitude, we make sacrifices to the ancestral spirits in hope that they will communicate our thankfulness to the spirits of the animals and plants who give up their lives to feed us. We hope that by showing our gratitude our ancestral spirits will ensure that all the things that share our world and nurture us will come back and continue to share the world with us again. I do not believe we should be buried in cement because, when we die, we too should feed the earth and the creatures of the earth in the same manner that they feed us.

This is the cycle of life. It is important that I state very clearly that I have never been told or taught that we make offering or sacrifices of any kind to Unkulunkulu. To make any kind of offering to Unkulunkulu would be unacceptable to the teachings that I have been given because Unkulunkulu is of everything and everything is of Unkulunkulu. As Mutwa (1986) conveys to us, there is nothing that we can give Unkulunkulu for s/he is ever present in the world.

Another guiding Ubuntu principle that I remember from the stories of Baba Mukulo conveys that our ancestors struggled with the idea of living with difference among each other. So, you can imagine how difficult this concept of living with differences is when we start to speak across cultures, across religious beliefs, and across racial lines. Yet, we have to try to live with differences because our humanity depends upon it. The most obvious of these contradictions is that my ancestors moved away from southern Africa in an effort to avoid war with their relatives, the amaZulu, but they in turn brought war and devastation to other ethnics as far up as central Africa. Baba affirms this view when he states: “We are the product of aggression in defense, they (non-Ngunis) know of our fury, for we were wounded inniyath (buffaloes)” (Personal communication, 2003). Baba’s point is supported in *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, by Adam Ashforth, who in reference to “negative ubuntu” makes the following point:

To the adage ‘A person is a person through other people,’ the negative corollary of ubuntu adds: ‘because they can destroy you.’ That is, a person can survive only to the extent that others in the community choose not to destroy him or her. How they might do so is less important than the fact that they can. And when they do, whether by physical or by occult violence, the demand for justice inevitably arises. (2005, p. 86)

Adam Ashforth’s point is that our ancestors, like some of us still do, were committing crimes against Ubuntu because they could. Military might became the ultimate power. It is at such times when Ubuntu is being misused that we need to take action because no worldview system is infallible. We should never allow ourselves to misuse our power.

Even in the extreme cases when we can justify killing in self-defense, Baba says, “we should never take life lightly and we should always remember, no matter the circumstance, killing is and should always be a very regrettable act because the warrior that kills has one less relative” (Baba, Personal Communication, 1982). In present state society, old conflict resolution strategies like moving away in an effort to preserve life cannot be accomplished easily. The idea of living with difference has become even more crucial. I share these facts for no other reason than to help unite our Ubuntu communities. It would seem Karl Deutsch has hit our nerve when he, in *Nationalism and its Alternatives*, states that: “A nation is a group of persons united by a common error about their ancestry and a common dislike of their neighbors” (Deutsch, 1969, p. 3).

Brothers and sisters, let us not hold on too tightly to our unique Black identities because the Ubuntu (African people) known as Nguni, who are ancestors of the Maseko Ngoni, are a result of Ubuntu legendary leaders and battles; of migrations and geographical displacement; of bloody ethnic feuds and kin-group formations.

Yes, the Ngoni have been created from the ashes of war but our languages, our spirituality and our memories connect us to our other Ubuntu relatives from North Africa to South Africa and from East Africa to West Africa. We are one people, we are Ubuntu. All of this the Ngoni know and have shared with us, their children, because memory is history and history is memory. Stories from our history tell us that there is great diversity that makes up what is Ngoni. Let us embrace the multiplicity as the diversity which will ensure our survival in an ever-changing world. Those who would try to create a singularity of the Ngoni identity will only neglect our other identities and undermine other valuable Ubuntu knowledges. Baba captures this problem when he states:

The problem for us as Maseko is that we have different memories from different parts of Africa and some of us have tried to impose our single inkatha [nation/kingdom] memory as the Ubuntu blue print for Maseko Ubuntu governance. But we know this cannot be Ubuntu as Ubuntu philosophy states, “we exist because you exist.” Thus, the idea of a single inkatha dominating a region does not make sense because inkatha is how the people unite and make sense of themselves without dominating each other or the land. The land dominates us and it cannot be any other way for us. (Personal Communication, 1981-2)

To have paradoxes and contradictions is to be human amongst other humans. We speak of Ubuntu unity, yet we identify ourselves as Maseko Ngoni and, in so doing, we create outsiders. It is the existence and acknowledgement of those who are outside of our inkatha (unity, strength and nationhood) that makes our existence possible (Mucina, 2006). But we should also ask who is silenced by our inkatha, who is an outsider of our inkatha and how did they come to be outsiders while we are insiders? If it is our experiences and knowledges that give us our diversity, then let us support all our knowledges without creating a hierarchy of importance and power. Let us be proud and remember our other relatives. Let us remember that we were and are one family; let us remember the love of Ubuntu and let this love guide us to unity. We know the truth of what is being spoken here because we can recognize it, which is to say we remember it. In this section we have engaged Ubuntu epistemology and the political struggles we have to watch for when trying to live an informed Ubuntu life. Now let us engage how we use Ubuntu as an honouring theory.

Ubuntu Honouring Theory

When we arrived at new places to which we had travelled to visit relations, Grandpa would gather the soil of the land, letting it rest on his palm. Squatting froglike in the characteristic pose of ancestral address, he would mix the soil and the water. Of these muddy waters he would have us drink. It was an initiation and a rite that united us with our new spaces and released the spirit. Locked in childhood innocence, we felt safe, we felt happy, as the soft scent of decaying vegetation tickled our nostrils.

- Yvonne Vera in *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992, p. 48)

This story by Vera communicates to me that the Ubuntu people of Africa know that the land is intelligible. We understand that the land has knowledge which is important for maintaining the balance of all life. As a child, when I was about to go out and play in the forest with other children, Baba would say to me: "Remember, there are sacred places in the great forest, always be respectful while you're in there." From this, I understood that the forest was a sacred place with power and that I was at its mercy when I entered its domain. The first time I entered a truly large forest, I was with some friends. At the edge of the forest, before we entered, the other children automatically began to ask the great forest for permission to enter and safe passage within her boundaries. I automatically followed suit because, from Baba's teachings, I understood the intelligibility of nature.

As we walked into the forest one of the older children reminded us all that it was forbidden to kill anything without asking permission from the spirits of the forest and, once we had killed, we had to also thank the spirit of the animal that had delivered itself to us. However, on this occasion we were only interested in having fun. Having found the perfect swimming pool, we played in it for some time and then went out to find some wild fruit to eat. While eating a monkey orange, I noticed that part of it was rotten and that it was riddled with worms. I threw the monkey orange down and yelled, "yuk, that's disgusting!" Everyone came to a stop. I looked around and saw the fear on the other kids faces. One of my friends informed me that I needed to pick up the monkey orange and place it down more respectfully. I did this without questioning but, when I was asked to apologize for being rude, I refused.

My thinking at the time was that these kids had gone overboard and my own sense of power and self-importance stopped me from apologizing. The other kids pleaded with me to apologize for my behaviour but I refused. As we were leaving for home, none of the other kids wanted to walk behind me as they believed that the forest spirits would not show me the way out because of my behaviour. They begged me to apologize one last time before we started for home and I told them that I did not believe anything was going to happen to me. After walking for about an hour we realized that we were lost because it had taken us less than half an hour to get to the pool.

We spent another hour and a half trying to find the path out of the forest. When we realized that our efforts were not paying off, we all climbed some trees to see if we could identify where our end destination was. From the tops of the trees we could all clearly see that we needed to go southwards for 20 minutes at the most. After walking for about another half an hour we all realized that the only way we would get out was by praying to the spirits of the forest and asking for help. I started the prayer by apologizing for my errant behaviour and then we all joined hands and asked for help to get back home. After this prayer, we found our way to the edge of the forest within 15 minutes and when we got home everybody knew what had happened to us. To this happening Baba simply said, "I hope you have learned to be careful when you are out in sacred places" and we never talked about it again. Our elders in our respective communities have taught our people that we are dependent on the land for our survival. This is why we have learned to honour our lands through our ceremonies and rituals. Let us use Ubuntu to move forward in relationship with all. Now let us use Black meaning making theory as a point of global engagement.

Conclusion: Regenerating African Philosophy Using the Principles of Sankofa

Paget Henry, in *Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications*, informs us that Africana phenomenology is not well known because it is not a Western philosophy and, more to the point, it is not Western phenomenology and speaks to the African experience (2006). Consequently Paget Henry leads us to question what Africana phenomenology is and his response to this question is as follows:

By phenomenology, I mean the discursive practice through which self-reflective descriptions of the constituting activities of consciousness are produced after the "natural attitude" of everyday life has been bracketed by some ego-displacing technique. An Africana phenomenology would thus be the self-reflective descriptions of the constituting activities of the consciousness of Africana peoples, after the natural attitudes of Africana egos have been displaced by de-centering techniques practiced in these cultures. (2006, p. 1)

The Ubuntu philosophy starts with the Africana phenomenological position of, I am because you are. This position communicates that self-reflection and meaning making occur in a social relational world. As social beings, it is important to understand that we make social meaning of our world through older meaning created by our ancestors. On the old meanings we construct new meanings and, with parallel meanings of the new and old, we construct more meanings. My opinion is affirmed in *I Write what I Like*, by Steve Biko, which conveys Black Consciousness as an 'inward-looking process' which allows one to honour one's identity in relation to the other (1996). The benefits of a 'inward-looking process' as a starting point for understanding Ubuntu is that the self begins to understand its political centrality to communal African politics.

In order to understand the Ubuntu organization of meaning, African phenomenology investigates the interweaving arenas of embodiment, time, space and action. These socially created phenomenon help ground our interpretive relation to experience. The act of philosophizing the experience we gain through our body is conceived of as embodiment; meaning, how we experience space and occupy it. The process of change created by newness and dying, between day and night or winter and summer, can be understood in relation to the concept of time. Place gives rise to the concept of occupation which is reflective of our geopolitics in relationship to space. We do things in order to create change or, I could say, our doing creates change. Hence, action is connected to purposeful change. Yet, purposeful change is such a contested interpretation and making it measurable becomes subjective and controversial. This is why in the Ubuntu worldview the main theoretical occupation is interpreting relational bonds and trying to understand how change, the constant fact, impacts everything. Yet, of such Ubuntu phenomenology we hear little because Black people are preoccupied with addressing racism. Paget Henry illuminates this point in the following manner:

Rather, the occasion for reflection has been the racist negating of the humanity of Africans and the caricature of "the negro" that it has produced. Unlike European phenomenology, these African reflections have been interested in clarifying the systemic error producing foundations of the European humanities and social sciences that have had to legitimate and make appear as correct this racist reduction of African humanity. (Henry, 2006, p. 4)

The colonial thinking of compulsory Whiteness, that we have been fighting since contact, is reflective of the thinking used by Robert Horwitz who is reflecting on Thomas Aquinas' (1966) *Summa Theologiae* with reference to John Locke's *Questions concerning the law of nature*, where he states from a Western educational perspective: "A rational creature therefore possesses a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end, and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law" (Locke, J., Horwitz, R. H., Clay, D., & Clay, J. S., 1990, p. 13). Here we encounter a problem of interpretation; in that, we should ask how we determine embodiment, time, space and action without being limited by Western arguments of rational, reasonable and purposeful action. I am aware that, at the inception of these arguments of rational, reasonable and purposeful action, specific persons are being excluded from the imaginable persons who were rational and reasonable. An American physician by the name of Samuel A. Cartwright, in 1851, claimed that the fleeing of Black slaves from captivity was not reasonable or rational. According to Samuel A. Cartwright, this behaviour was in fact reflective of a Black person's mental illness. Samuel A. Cartwright defined this so called mental illness as a medical condition which he called "drapetomania" or the disease causing Negroes to run away (*Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race*, 1851).⁴ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997), in his edited work called *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, reminds us that great Western thinkers were not willing to imagine Black people as rational or reasonable beings and in fact used our Blackness as the grounds for labelling us as primitive.

David Hume in 1776 argued “I am apt to suspect, the Negroes and in general all the other species of man (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites” (Eze, 1997, p. 35). Immanuel Kant in 1724 used the racial category as the absolute marker of oppression when he stated, “This fellow was quite black...a clear proof that what he said was stupid” (Eze, 1997, p. 35). In my review of my engagement with compulsory able-bodied Whiteness, I have learned an important lesson which was put in the following way by Rod Michalko and Tanya Titchosky in “Putting Disability in Its Place”, which was published in *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*:

The question of ‘where we speak from’ is thus fundamental to the question of self-identification (p. 205)... The sighted person does not indicate that the door is open. A sighted person, ‘knowing’ that the blind person will have ‘trouble’ opening the door, opens it. The sighted person does not indicate that the door is open. The blind person ‘should see’ that the door is open. But not seeing this, the blind person tries to open it. The sighted person is surprised. Both stand groping. The door to the building remains open, but the door to any interactional development of what it means to be blind, remains closed tighter than ever. (2001, pp. 205, 215)

Here is what I find fascinating from an Africana phenomenological perspective. The orientation of the discussion by Rod Michalko and Tanya Titchosky is set in the field of disability but its implication for equality, the intersections and interlockingness of oppression, marginality, racism and sexism is larger than disability only. It is about people who are in diverse forms of relationships to each other. Yet, from our diverse social relationships with each other we try to impose our single interpretive meaning on others even if our own interpretive meaning contradicts our own experiences. This is especially true in the White context where they know that Blackness and disability are the markers of unwantedness but can never answer the question of, unwanted from what? On the other hand disability has used the experience of Blackness in the same manner it has used feminism, to draw skills and strength in addressing issues of disability as a marker of inequity. I would like to follow this tradition of borrowing between disability and Blackness and set Rod Michalko and Tanya Titchosky’s words within a race discourse. Let me replace Blind person with Black person and Sighted person with White person and review the new context of interpretive meaning that arises: “The Black person ‘should see’ that the door is open. But not seeing this, the Black person tries to open it. The White person is surprised. Both stand groping. The door to the building remains open, but the door to any interactional development of what it means to be Black, remains closed tighter than ever.” I have read many writers that highlight the problem of Africa and give us their solution as to why Africa is the problem. A word is seldom uttered about Blackness. Yet we all know that from the position of compulsory Whiteness, Blackness is their problem.

Africana phenomenology could prove very useful because it helps me question what is sayable and doable about Blackness within the nexus of social interpretation and meaning making. Africana phenomenology challenges me to think about who is missing in our reasoning, who is being labeled as unwanted and what does unwanted come to mean? African phenomenology allows me think about the fact that if interpretation is the creation of meaning then meaning should also lead me to the question of interpretation. In other words, if all Ubuntu are affected by the interpretation of meaning, can we explore how certain Ubuntu voices are empowered and authenticated while certain voices are disempowered? What would it mean in our social interpretation of meaning to have certain voices which have been disempowered into silence speak from an empowered position? African phenomenology does not just help me question, it also helps me think about how I might validate the social interpretation of other Black people. For example, I can talk about my story of disability as a way of engaging Blackness in relation to disability. Let me be honest, I am uncomfortable with putting Blackness and disability together because there is a history of viewing Blackness as disability. Yet I cannot be silent about disability within Black communities. These are the tensions that I must navigate when I make Blackness and disability rub up against each other in our neo-colonial global state society. Now that we are linked by this story, where do I end and where do you begin? Could the sacred spiritual cycle of breath connect us into one, Ubuntu? I hope we have grounded each other in our Ubuntu meaning making and Ubuntu interpretation of meaning because the stories that I will now share may challenge and decenter us. In which case, having our Ubuntu orientation becomes important for grounding us in Black power.

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Notes

¹ The act of using past knowledge in planning for the future.

² Bushmen is a derogative word which once again was invented by the white man. Our brothers and sisters that they call bushmen are known as San (called the BaTwa by Bantu) and Khoi-Khoi, while the BaMbuti and Ik, just to name a few other Indigenous who again the white man reduced to the labell of pygmy.

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5388182.stm

⁴ Found on PBS Africans in American <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3106t.html>