Editorial:

Sustainability stories from the North and South – on the ethics and politics of sustainability?

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Mama Gcina Mhlophe (2004) recalls a definitive tale of the origin of stories which took place long, long ago, presumably in Africa where the first people lived. In this story, Mazanendaba, the heroine, recognised that something was missing from her life, from her family's life, from human life, and ultimately from the whole world. As Mazanendaba put it: "Can you imagine – the whole world without any stories or dreams!" (Mhlophe, 2004:1) In response, she journeyed deep into the spirit world. There she met the Spirit People and exchanged images of her 'real' life for stories. These she brought to the real world where they would become the raw materials for dreaming. From Mazanendaba's lips, these stories "went from village to village, from country to country, to all the continents of the world" (Mhlophe, 2004:5). It is in this essential human tradition of sharing stories that we are sharing this special issue with you, for free as stories are meant to be shared (irrespective of what publishing houses might tell us).

So, once upon a time, there was a colloquium. We know – 'colloquium' is not a very common word in stories. It is hard to imagine Mazanendaba, (or Hans Christian Andersen or Dr Suess) using it. But there you have it. That is how this particular story began. Geoff was the host of this colloquium, Kenneth was the storyteller, and Neil was among the eager listeners who all said '*Cosi!*'[1] as Kenneth was introduced. And like Mama Gcina, and her grandmother before her, Kenneth told a story about stories.

His starting point was to explain our 'real' world of, frankly speaking, unsustainability. This 'real' world is in many ways a dystopian world. A world characterised by turmoil, greed,

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1   "'Cosi!' everyone replied, meaning 'we are ready to listen'." (Mhlophe, 2004:5).

unconstrained consumption, extreme wealth and its inseparable sibling miserable asphyxiating poverty, destruction of ecosystems, extinction, injustice, prejudice, killing, and death. Of course, stories that are all bad do not sit well with an audience. And so, Kenneth next went on to describe some of the popular counter-narratives about apprehending this unsustainability.

He reminded us, eager listeners, of the optimism produced by the Paris Agreement's 17colourful Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with their promise of us all being or becoming part of a common world. He reminded us how the Scandinavian region (his home region) is often perceived as a model region for how to transition to sustainability. He related to us the Nordic Council of Ministers' (2020) high ideals for promoting an inclusive, equal, and interconnected region with shared values and strengthened cultural exchanges and welfare. He noted how these ideals were premised on the well-known definition of sustainability as a balance between economic development, social equality, and ecological sustainability (in that order) (McAteer, 2019). It is this same notion of balance which also underpins the SDGs. Finally, in terms of the optimism of popular counter-narratives, Kenneth noted how more and more people are being educated in sustainability and are working within what has become a sustainability industry.

At this point, however, his story again regressed in the direction of a gothic horror. He described studies of the personal stories of new sustainability managers that he and some colleagues had undertaken in Sweden (Jørgensen et al., 2023; Berne & Jørgensen, 2025). These personal stories revealed how sustainability work was difficult, and how these new managers often experienced their work as a mental burden as a result of a profound dissonance between how things were communicated and how they were done in practice in organisations. He noted how these new sustainability managers described individualistic environments and feelings of personal chaos. Rather than a glimpse of a happy story of how organisations contribute to the sustainability agenda, these sustainability managers' stories pointed towards difficult work lives that had to be lived in the tensions between their own sense of caring for the world and how it was 'possible' to care for the world in the 'reality' of business organisations.

From these stories of new sustainability managers, it seemed that the popular sustainability counter-narratives to the dystopian reality of unsustainability might actually be nothing more than a narrative hoax designed to mask, control, and continue business-as-usual (Boje & Jørgensen, 2020)! From these stories at a micro level, Kenneth noted how the SDGs themselves may have been little more than a catalyst for fusing the story of sustainability with the expansion of a neoliberal market agenda[2] (just as described by Eccles & Van der Merwe, 2020). For Kenneth and his co-workers, it stands to reason that when something akin to the consensus sustainability agenda is framed within neoliberalism in this way, sustainability is subjected to an economisation of life, subordinating sustainability to economic concerns and legitimising a continued exploitation and 'resourcification' of people and nature (Banerjee et al., 2021; Latour, 2018).

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2   Neoliberalism is defined in a number of ways, but here we borrow from Wendy Brown's definition which sees it as an economisation of every aspect of life (Brown, 2015:17).

This thinking reduces sustainability and environmental concerns to a strategy to be pursued that could result in 'value'[3] creation (Banerjee, 2011). Thus, the 'radical transformation' aspiration of sustainability has actually not occurred. In fact, the more 'corporate sustainability' becomes diluted, the more environmental and social issues continue to worsen on a global scale (Bluhdorn, 2017). As such, sustainability has failed to address environmental and social issues as it suggested it would. In a sense, the 'radical transformation' alluded to by sustainability is a threat to the core principles of consumer capitalism, and with environmentalists and liberal humanists providing the perfect cover for the continuance of socially and environmentally destructive practices, capitalism just reinvented itself under the guise of being 'caring' (Bluhdorn, 2017).

Notions of natural limits to economic growth are erased in fantastic stories of technological innovation and entrepreneurship. This is clearly counterproductive to ecological and social sustainability. Characteristically, instead of being spaces where people appear to one another and become actors from a sense of having something in common, organisations become spaces of disappearance. Sustainability, at most, becomes a technical matter of dealing with sustainability regulations, and it is something that is taken care of by a small number of people who are positioned marginally in the organisation.

Again, however, bad stories do not sit well with an audience. In his presentation, Kenneth did not leave off with this critique of popular sustainability counter-narratives. Instead, he returned to stories as sites of potential political and ethical action. To do this, he reflected on his theoretical work on storytelling inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt (Jørgensen, 2022), where he had described storytelling as follows: "Storytelling is understood as the process through which actors reconstruct their experiences and appear in a collective space. Storytelling is thus enacted within and from spaces and is a means for political action." (Jørgensen, 2022:51). He emphasised that while we ought to avoid being seduced by the positive narratives of sustainability, and while we ought to be taking a closer, more critical look at the narratives and stories of sustainability, we ought also to keep an open mind about sustainability. Because the alternative is surely extinction. He explained his belief that reconstructing 'real' life experiences and bringing these into "spaces of appearance" (Arendt, 1958:199)[4] through storytelling will disclose the complex, nuanced, and controversial story of sustainability. This in itself is a political action. But it is also a *potential*.

Thus, Arendt's storytelling is critical but also creative. She argued that to act in the world, we need to embrace and love the world as it is with all its wickedness and imperfection (Eiríksdóttir, 2024). Inspired by her friend Walter Benjamin (Arendt, 1968), she understood how business and organisations are complicit in propelling "the angel of history" from the past into the future, while she witnesses that the only real effects of the illusion of capitalism are the steady accumulation of piles of trash. But Benjamin

3   The word 'value' is another of those words that is commonly dropped but seldom defined. In this context, value is just a more palatable way of saying 'profit'.

4   For Arendt, a 'space of appearance' is a space of praxis really. It is a space in which people "are together in a manner of speech and action" (Arendt, 1958:199). It is out of this combination of speech and action that these spaces are imbued with power.

also taught her to dive into the depths of experience to find those pearls that, although they have suffered a sea-change, still exist at the bottom of our experience. Thus, stories, although they critically disclose the consequences of politics of business, also contain within them these pearls of existence from which it is possible to imagine and build another world (Berne & Jørgensen, 2025).

For this, we need what Kenneth referred to as "storymaking" (Jørgensen, 2024), a term that combines imagination with material practices of making as well as material conditions of becoming. It entails that sustainability requires both other kinds of imaginaries and other kinds of material practices, including work practices, but also other kinds of political assemblies. The cooptation of storytelling by capitalism is said to entail "a crisis of imagination" (Fotaki et al., 2020). This crisis of imagination is a crisis of the political. Tamboukou (2012) highlights the intimate connection between storytelling and politics in Arendt's writings in that stories connect truth and politics by revealing multiple perspectives while remaining open and attentive to the unexpected and to new beginnings. Stories thereby reconfigure politics into a sphere of horizontal connection through which new horizons can be reimagined. For Arendt, this is what politics is all about.

Kenneth's presentation was followed by a lively debate, and the colloquium eventually ran out of time. In part because he was genuinely grateful for having had the opportunity to hear Kenneth's presentation, and in part because he still had questions and comments, Neil dropped Geoff and Kenneth an email after the colloquium. The specific contents of the email are unimportant. All that is important is that one email led to another, and the three of us eventually agreed that it would be an excellent idea to attempt to revive the political by opening a 'space of appearance', a storytelling space as a special issue for the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. We were particularly excited by the prospect of bringing together sustainability storytellers from the Global North and the Global South to try to recover some pearls from which we can imagine and build another world.

Of course, when Mazanendaba set out to find stories, she really didn't know what she would get. Otherwise, she would already have had stories. And she certainly didn't impose restrictions on the Spirit People in terms of themes or writing styles. Likewise with us. Our call for papers explicitly relaxed academic writing norms.[5] It invited unconventional submissions. And we certainly didn't have a clue what this call would bring. But now we are blessed with hindsight, and we can say that this is what the Spirit People brought us:

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first article in this collection is by Kenneth himself. Although it does stand on its own, our decision to start with this one was because, in many ways, it extended the introduction and added more substance to the scene we have begun to set in this editorial. A key theme that the article develops is stories as sites of resistance against hegemonic stories, or as stories as liberation movements against the colonisation of minds. To do this, Kenneth compares and contrasts Hannah Arendt's ethics of freedom, as a site of resistance to entrenched power, with neoliberal conceptualisations of freedom,

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5   We did of course insist on normal peer review processes!

as the manifestation of entrenched power itself. From this theoretical comparison, he then moves to propose a way with stories in relation to developing and actualising the notion of Gaia as a step towards achieving some measure of sustainability.

While Kenneth's contribution is fairly 'typical' as far as academic writing style is concerned, the second article in this special issue, crafted by Bryan Robinson and 12 other colleagues, is anything but typical! But before describing the article, a little narrative detour is warranted. The *African Journal of Business Ethics* is the academic journal produced by the African Business Ethics Network (BEN-Africa). BEN-Africa funds the publication of the journal in its entirety,[6] giving the *African Journal of Business Ethics* the enviable distinction of being an open-source scholarly journal which doesn't charge page fees. In this way, BEN-Africa is instrumental in creating this perpetual 'space of appearance' for scholarly stories about sustainability emerging on the African continent. It is therefore only fitting that this special issue includes a submission comprising a collection of 13 short stories about BEN-Africa from a group of people who have, in the past and who continue to, play a key role in keeping this organisation alive. The stories that are contained in this article come from BEN-Africa presidents (including the founding and present presidents). They come from members of advisory boards and members of the executive committee. They tell stories of origin, of where BEN-Africa all began. They tell stories of hope, community, resilience, and caring. They tell stories of amazing conference experiences,[7] which serve as 'oases' of thinking. And while most of the short stories emphasise the positive possibilities of a better world that might emerge out of the 'spaces of appearance' facilitated by BEN-Africa, there are moments where the authors insist that we pause and reflect on attempts to capture the story spaces and convert them into spaces of disappearance.

The third article, presented by Jessica van Jaarsveld, returns to a more conventional scholarly storytelling style. What Jessica sets out to do is extend a concept of leadership developed by Metz (2018) based on the African communal philosophy of *ubuntu*, beyond the human, to take in what she refers to as the "natural world". She does this by drawing on the Shona concept of '*ukama*'. Like *ubuntu*, *ukama* is a relational theory. However, unlike *ubuntu*, which emphasises the relationality among all people, *ukama* is much more universal and emphasises the relationality between all things. The affinity between this and the Gaian ideas developed by Kenneth ought to be immediately clear. Of Gaia, Kenneth writes: "It attunes to how we relate to nature as a process that we are part of". Beyond this affinity, like Kenneth, Jessica also highlights the political potential of storytelling to integrate this *ukama* relationality among all things into the imaginations of people. However, it is in the specifics of which people Jessica's story focuses on that it becomes a little challenging. Specifically, her focus on business leaders is tricky. Business leaders are leaders who operate in the context of business. And, almost by definition, business is a highly individualistic philosophical system. The question of

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6   Without imposing any editorial constraints on the journal.

7   Besides the *African Journal of Business Ethics*, BEN-Africa hosts an annual conference which brings together people from a variety of worlds (academic, business, government, NGO) and from across the African continent and beyond to talk about business ethics in Africa.

commensurability between this context and the relational philosophical system of *ukama* then becomes something which needs to be confronted at some point. No doubt this is a question for future stories.

The fourth article by Keoagile Mhlakaza and his colleagues is by far the most specific in terms of the issues that it confronts, namely intersectional gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions in the workplace. In their story, Keoagile and his co-authors, in their varying identities, describe their journeys of discovery (and confirmation) of the cycles of aggression against Black women in managerial positions in the workplace. Theirs is a story of conscientisation. As editors, while we were never in doubt as to the importance of the story that was presented, we were definitely forced to reflect carefully on whether this article actually fitted into a collection of stories about *sustainability*. Was this not a story of workplace aggression and discrimination rather than a sustainability story?

The fact that it is in the special issue is an indication of our final decision. But it is worth outlining our reasoning. At the most superficial, one might simply turn to the SDGs and note SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality, SDG 8, which among other things considers decent work, and perhaps SDG 10, which focuses on reducing inequality as justification. The problem is that we have been a little critical of the SDGs here, so this might not be the best rationale. Keoagile and his co-authors offer up justice as a basis for this being a article about sustainability. They argue that sustainability, in its totality, is about securing intra- and inter-generational justice: Securing the needs of the present generation while not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Unfair discrimination, especially systemic discrimination of the sort that they discover (and confirm), is clearly an injustice. And as such, it can be argued that this is a sustainability issue.

But there is another reason for including this article that we think is worth mentioning – solidarity. As we have already highlighted, in Kenneth's presentation that precipitated this whole special issue, he noted how particular special interest groups have moved very deliberately to capture the sustainability agenda. This they have done to sustain their positions of power and privilege, despite this being counterproductive to sustainability. But capturing the story is not the only strategy that has been adopted. Another very common strategy involves splitting those who are oppressed. It's a divide-and-conquer strategy. And it is very effective.

One needs to look no further than the climate negotiations, where developing countries are used by fossil fuel companies to militate that climate mitigation will adversely impact their right to develop and thereby meet the needs of their people. And there is undoubtedly merit in the complaints of developing countries. The way they are structured, there is indeed evidence that climate mitigation arrangements prejudice certain groups of people and privilege others (Ergene et al., 2024). The point is this. If we write intersectional race and gender issues out of the sustainability agenda, then we write the sustainability agenda out of movements to secure intersectional justice. The oppressed fight and those in power take a concrete step towards keeping their power.

This brings us to the final story in this collection: Tracy Trägårdh's 'interview with a mountain'. This is a beautiful story that is at once a story from the Global North where Tracy lives and a story from the Global South where she had her conversation with a mountain. It is at once a story that is 'normally' academic, littered with words like "heterogeneity", "plurality", and "ecological", and at the same time, whimsical and fantastic. And it must be read in its entirety. But there are two things which we would like to draw out in this editorial.

The first is time. When one is in conversation with a mountain, one considers memory over geological time, time measured in millions or even billions of years. The Barberton Makhonjwa Mountains in South Africa, just around the corner from where two of us live, are estimated to be 3.5 billion years old. Rounding off to the nearest 100 million years, that means they came into existence 3.5 billion years before the first humans walked on the planet roughly 300,000 years ago!? And in all likelihood, they will be around in some shape or form 3.5 billion years after humans have gone extinct. This is time which makes the five to ten years of 'long-term' investment seem just silly. In this regard, one of the consequences of conversations with mountains must surely be a sense of humility for *Homo sapiens* if not for *Homo economicus*. In this time realm, our fantastic stories of technological innovation and entrepreneurship acquire a new perspective.

The second is some sense of one-ness or coherence of stories between the Global North and the Global South in spite of the heterogeneity. When we set out to assemble this special issue, we anticipated contrast and contestation in the stories. And surely there are major and growing geopolitical tensions between the Global North and the Global South. But one cannot read Tracy's story and not see the affinity between the theoretical concepts that she engages with (theoretical concepts are attributed to people with names like 'Leopold' and 'Arendt' and 'Le Guin') and the fact that Mazanendaba brought stories to the 'whole world', not just people. And one certainly cannot miss the affinity between these concepts and the Shona concept of *ukama* that Jessica introduced. Global North or Global South, these stories force us to consider a broader relationality in terms of people and beyond.

On that note, Mama Gcina ends each of her stories with the isiZulu phrase "*iyaphela*" – "it ends". But then she tells another one …

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