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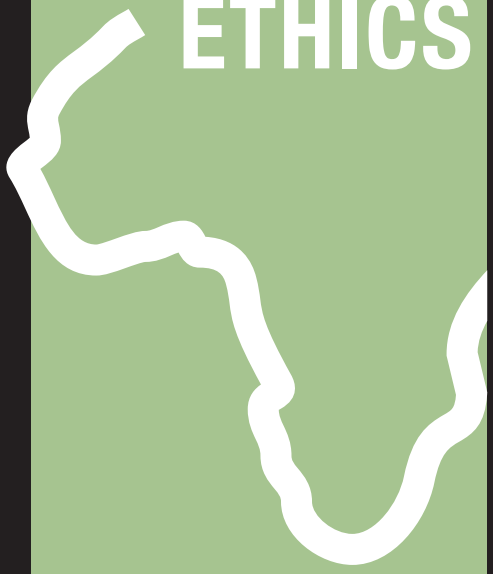

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Editorial:

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,

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).

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,

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

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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Towards an ethics of freedom: The politics of storytelling in organisations

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Abstract

This article[1] engages with sustainability storytelling from the perspective of freedom. Freedom is discussed in relation to a politics of storytelling that can counter power. Freedom, it is argued, is enacted in genuine storytelling and is experienced between people. The conditions of the possibility of ethics in organisations are thus conditioned on the political framing of the spaces between people in terms of how they condition how people may appear in storytelling and how people together transform these spaces for future appearances. Arendt's ethics of freedom is contrasted with the concept of freedom embedded in neoliberal capitalism and related to sustainability. Genuine storytelling is to bring something new into existence from the condition of plurality and responsibility for the world. Storytelling presumes a space for plural political participation. Freedom therefore also forwards attention towards the material possibilities that allow people to participate and appear as unique subjects. The article ends by positioning Arendt's storytelling in relation to a storytelling model for transitioning to sustainability, which positions Latour's notion of Gaia as the centre of four storytelling cycles.

1. Introduction

This article engages with sustainability stories by discussing the relations between freedom and storytelling. It develops an ethics of freedom from Hannah Arendt's notion of storytelling. I argue that her notion of freedom is closely associated with the possibilities of enacting a politics of genuine storytelling that counters how stories are used as tools for dominant power

1 I want to acknowledge the excellent comments made by the external reviewers. These comments have been significant for the article's development.

relations to devise corporate identities that perpetuate ecological and social injustices (Deleuze, 1992a). Today, there is a politics of storyselling where stories are used for political manipulation and marketing (Jørgensen & Valero, 2023).

Such storyselling has little to do with genuine storytelling, which is understood as the curious and compassionate sharing of experiences where people come together from the recognition of belonging to a common world (Arendt, 1968, 1998; Benjamin, 1999). A common sense is not individual but is shared in a community and therefore holds potential to disrupt dominant narratives (Holt & Wiedner, 2024; Jørgensen, 2022). Storytelling for sustainability therefore also relies on a sense of having something in common with all the living agents of this world (Jørgensen, 2024; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025; Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020). Arendt called this sense of belonging to a common world a "Oneness", with a capital O (Arendt, 1968). This concept of "Oneness" suggests that, despite natural, cultural, and personal differences, we share a common human condition (Arendt, 1998).

The disruption of this sense of living in a common world is at the heart of climate denial and the justification of extreme inequalities. For Latour (2018), to land, or to get down-to-earth, is to realise that land was always central in politics. Land was central in the colonisation of countries and nature. Today, colonisation works differently in that it is enforced through controlling people's hearts and minds. Using stories to incline and legitimate corporate exploitation is important, because in modern democracies, power works from the premise that people are free citizens (Foucault, 2003). However, embedded in these 'soft' forms of control, there is always hidden another brute dimension, which lies in the possible economic consequences if one does not play along.

In this article, I explore a different perception of storytelling through Arendt's notion of freedom. The purpose is *to develop a politics of genuine storytelling that can respond to a plural world that is nonetheless common, and which can help address ecological and social injustice*. I discuss and contrast this notion of storytelling with reference to the idea of neoliberal subjectivity, which is embedded in how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are enacted, and which perpetuates ecological and social injustice. Instead, genuine storytelling plays the voice of conscience and perceives sustainability as true solidarity.

The article proceeds in the next section by contextualising sustainability in relation to freedom. This brings us to outlining the principles by which Arendt positioned freedom as political action. The relations between freedom and storytelling are then discussed. Freedom is presented as the ability to create, which means that freedom is experienced and embedded in the virtuous and embodied in the performance of art – a unique story performed in interaction with others in a collective space. A discussion of the politics of storytelling is then undertaken where I contrast Arendt's notion of storytelling with the politics of storyselling, embedded in the idea of sustainable capitalism (McAteer, 2019). As a final point, Arendt's storytelling is positioned in a storytelling model for transitioning to sustainability, which positions Latour's notion of Gaia as the centre of four storytelling cycles.

2. Sustainability and political freedom

While Hannah Arendt is well known in social science studies for her compelling vision of political freedom (Cane, 2015:55), her writings have generally failed to catch the attention of scholars of business ethics. The notion of freedom is instead used to denote the process of ethical self-formation, following the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1997; Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Townley, 1995). Underlining this focus on the self, Foucault emphasised that freedom is a condition of ethics, and that ethics is the form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection (Foucault, 1997:284).

The limitations concerning ethical self-formation are illustrated by a comment Arendt once made where she argued that the centre of moral considerations is the self, while the centre of politics is the world (Arendt, 2003:153). While ethics for Arendt begins with a relation to the self (Arendt, 1996), it is simultaneously world-centred and focused on the possibilities of action. For her, politics and freedom go together and condition each other. It is something people experience in their interaction with others (Arendt, 2006:148). The dialogues that people have with themselves are important for ethics, but these are conditioned and grounded in a true sense of solidarity with the plurality that is the world (Eiríksdóttir, 2024; Roodt, 2005).

In fact, the inner state of 'interaction' with oneself can be regarded as a sheltered space from a world in which people can feel free without having the political space in which they can appear and act freely as political subjects. Without outer manifestations, the freedom that is exercised in dialogue with oneself – the activity she called thinking – is politically irrelevant (Arendt, 2006:146). Thus, ethics requires political engagement (Butler, 2012). The ethical implications exceed the demand of the subject to become political (McMurray et al., 2011). It includes attention to the political spaces in which plural people – with Arendt's words – can appear freely before one another with their voices, intentions, motivations, souls, and bodies. Such appearances happen through storytelling (Arendt, 1998:50). Genuine storytelling is therefore conditioned by the dialogue with the self from the condition of love of a plural world. A story is where life and thought become one (Kristeva, 2001).

This notion of ethics corresponds to the promises embedded in the SDGs defined in the Paris agreement (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs are important in putting sustainability on the agenda, and they do represent some kind of common orientation and language that governments, organisations, and institutions can draw on. However, the truth of the SDGs does not lie in the official narratives but in the manifold of small practices through which the SDGs are enacted in practice (Jørgensen, 2002; Jørgensen & Boje, 2010). The myriad of small practices and the patterns they make constitute the truth of sustainability and are important political battlegrounds. In the centre of these battles are organisations, municipalities, communities, people, animals, living conditions, and all the complex and violent histories that belong to places.

Arendt's ethics of freedom is a critique of power relations and entails a hope for a new politics. It thereby provides a different image of organising as a process where free people come together for a common purpose, rather than organising as a means of enslavement

and exploitation of people. For example, Stonebridge (2024) calls *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998) Arendt's love story with the world. Similarly, Kristeva (2001) calls *The Human Condition* a vehement defence of humanism against totalitarianism. Totalitarianism implies the instrumentalisation of people and nature. This entails transforming politics into a question of economy. Arendt argues that while Marxism and capitalism are very different, they share the same mistake of reducing politics to a question of economy.

When organising pivots around the economy, people cannot live a whole life in them, neither as craftsmen, artists, artisans, or professionals, nor as citizens who can choose between a reasonable range of choices. A jobholder or businessman does not live a full political life, but is enslaved by modern ways of organising (Arendt, 1998:198-199). The complexity involved is highlighted by Foucault's notion of power in that he argues that power is rarely coercive but works through manipulating the choices that people can possibly make (Deleuze, 1992a; McNay, 2009). Even if power relations today seem pervasive in organisations, Arendt believed that we nonetheless still carry the original idea of politics at the bottom of our existence. This idea of politics is one of the pearls that she famously argued has sunk to the bottom of the sea, where it awaits the pearl diver to bring it back to the realm of the living (Arendt, 1999:54-55).

Thus, the ethics of freedom, which is enacted in the idea of political freedom, is the ground for a critique of power relations but also points towards new ways of living together from an affirmation of a world that is and has been in all its incompleteness, imperfection, and injustice (Roodt, 2005). The promises of Arendt's ethics of freedom are therefore a grounded ethics of sustainability that makes action against ecological and social injustice possible on a collective scale. It does not presume that injustice will be overcome or go away. As pointed out by Nietzsche, the divine wickedness of the world is what makes beauty and perfection possible (Deleuze, 1986; Nietzsche, 2006). Plurality is divine and wicked, beautiful and ugly, and grand and lowly.

3. The ethics of freedom

To construct an ethics of freedom from Arendt's philosophy is challenging and may appear almost paradoxical. She made a clear distinction between ethics and politics, as noted previously, where she hinted that moral philosophy was almost irrelevant without manifestations in the world of politics. By that expression, she did not mean to abolish ethics but rather resituate the hierarchical ordering between the "vita contemplativa" – a life dedicated to pure thinking in isolation from the world – and the "vita activa" – political life (Arendt, 1998:12-15).

Arendt's purpose was thus to attain a new balance between contemplation and the active political life, which for her replaces "the enormous superiority" that contemplation has had in philosophy. Contemplation had meant that 'freedom' had been translated as the ending of all political activity – 'to free oneself' from the entanglement in worldly affairs and the business of this world. Accordingly, Arendt believed that ethics had been concerned with the self without taking the world into consideration. Her ethics therefore also imply a different understanding of the meaning of the world in relation to being.

For Martin Heidegger, for example, the world was a problem that would lead to alienation from pure authentic being (Hill, 2024). Arendt turned it around. She argued that the world is the condition for our existence and therefore requires our attention and care. This understanding of the world is embedded in her emphasis on natality as the human condition (Arendt, 1996). Thus, the newcomer actualises the meaning of the world per se – a view that contrasts Heidegger's view that meaning relies on being-towards-death – the fact that we are mortal beings who can die at any moment (Jørgensen, 2024:94). There are different kinds of birth in play here. For example, she argues that action is like a second birth that confirms the first physical birth. Through acting and inscribing ourselves into history, we confirm that we have been born into this world and are new beginners. But natality also refers to a third kind of birth, namely the birth of human history. This is the time when life philosophies and religions emerged, and where we began to write stories and document history. Thus, storytelling belongs to an era where we became aware of ourselves as part of human and the earth's history, a point she made from one of her mentors, Karl Jaspers (Arendt, 1968). But beyond that, there is birth of life itself or the fact that we are earthbound. *The Human Condition* is a critique of the modern perception that we can separate ourselves from nature. Through life itself, we remain connected to all other animate and inanimate agencies and conditions of life (Arendt, 1998:2).

Latour (2017, 2018) and Latour and Weibel (2020) capture this kind of birth in the metaphor of Gaia, which I will get back to at the end of the article. For now, it is important to note how natality points to remembrance and the birth and rebirth of life as the ultimate meaning of existence. The importance of natality for sustainability is, for example, also directly expressed in the concern for future generations in the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability (The World Commission, 1987). Arendt's notion of natality therefore implies solidarity with the world. It does not belong to us. We have borrowed it to make our lives, and we are obliged to take care of it and be responsible for it. In the end, responsibility relies on whether we love the world enough to take responsibility for it (Arendt, 2006:193). This love of the world is also expressed in her notion of thinking, which goes beyond reflection and reflexivity, being grounded in conscience (Arendt, 1996; Holt, 2020; Scott & Stark, 1996). The life of the mind (Arendt, 1978) is therefore inevitably tied to societies, communities, and all the lives lived in this world.

Thinking concerns what a person can do and what they cannot do. What is at stake is being a friend with oneself. For example: "I cannot do particular things because having done them I can no longer live with myself" (Arendt, 2003:97). This living-with-oneself relies on thinking about where the being and judging of oneself are performed. She called it "solitude". Thus, thinking in solitude is an inner dialogue – a two-in-one conversation with oneself (Arendt, 2003:98). To think with life is to be fully alive. It is opposed to sleepwalking through life, which is also possible (Arendt, 1978:5). To be free relies on thinking because freedom is to be one with oneself. But because we are part of the world, it is critical that this being with oneself can manifest in the world in ways in which one's belonging to the world can be confirmed (Jackson, 2013). This brings us to how freedom connects with politics.

4. Politics and freedom

The challenge in an ethics of freedom is to frame another understanding of what freedom is and how it relates to politics. For Arendt, the very notion of freedom invites intuitive misunderstanding. It is riddled with associations to "free will" or to a "sovereign individual". Because ethics is about restraining oneself from certain actions and because freedom is intuitively associated with free will, ethics and freedom are, according to this understanding, almost binary opposites. However, Arendt suggests that this view of freedom is misunderstood.

She argues that freedom is experienced in the spaces between people. It is directly linked and cannot be understood independently of politics and action. She notes (Arendt, 1961:191) that freedom is seldom the direct aim of politics, but freedom is the reason why politics exists at all. The notions of freedom as "free will" or as "sovereignty" have furthermore, according to Arendt (1961:204), been disastrous because they presume an independence of all others and of the ability, if necessary, to assert oneself against these others.

These notions contrast directly with one of the essential elements of living, which she identifies as a reciprocal interdependence of people, including the historical, spatial, and material world that people are born into (Arendt, 1961:204). This interdependence is linked to another human condition: plurality (Arendt, 1998:7). "Only in death is human existence completely and utterly individual". According to Arendt, people can only be free or suffer the reverse through engaging with others. Only with reference to one another and of the things they do – the field of politics – can they experience freedom as something positive and not as an inner space in which they can negate compulsion (Arendt, 1961:191). Arendt therefore claimed that "'to act' and 'to be free' are one" (Arendt, 1961:196).

To act and to be free is a basic human condition and, as such, a basic human right. As noted, she is not referring to the possibility of acting in an unrestrained way. Action is always conditioned on the world, which has been handed over to us and from which we act. Freedom is closely tied to the creative reenactment of this world, but is also tied to people, to nature, and to the world. Arendt's notion of freedom is therefore a relational and contingent freedom. The possibility of action almost always exists in social affairs. However, it relies on the plural others together with whom one is living and the conditions in which one lives. Action and freedom are therefore necessarily always collective because without others' support, one would be impotent and powerless (Arendt, 1998:201; Birmingham, 2002; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025).

Judith Butler (2015) has discussed this aspect of Arendt's work and has reworked her notion of action into a more material and embodied performance in which the entanglement of the 'I' and the 'other' becomes central. Butler emphasises that there is a 'we' and indeed a 'they' and an 'it' in all actions and performances (Butler, 2006; Butler & Berbec, 2017). For her, it makes no sense to talk about ethics outside of the sphere of politics. For example, it is inherently difficult to create a good life for oneself without taking

into consideration the worldly context of inequality, injustice, and exploitation (Butler, 2012:9). With reference to Adorno, she asks whether one can live a good life in a bad life (Butler, 2012, 2015).

Furthermore, Butler argues that people are born into a world without having made any conscious choice or deliberation. We are thus bound to people, spaces, and places we don't know and haven't chosen (Butler, 2015:106-107). This 'unchosen' nature of earthly cohabitation and the open-endedness and plurality this entails is the condition of existence and implies responsibility (Butler, 2015:111-112). For Butler, this responsibility necessarily goes beyond the responsibility humans have to one another and includes the responsibility that people have in relation to all other living organisms.

The implications are not only that it makes no sense to separate moral questions from the relations of humans to one another and to what people do in particular conditions. The implications are more radical in the sense that the human and non-human others are implicated in one's actions. The others do not only demand my responsibility. They are also the conditions for my own actions, my own freedom, my own possibilities, and so forth. These considerations concerning freedom take us back to the connections between storytelling and sustainability.

5. Freedom and storytelling

For Arendt, storytelling is the only true political action because it is where people can disclose 'who' they are as opposed to 'what' they are (Arendt, 1998:176-177; Tassinari et al., 2017). Through storytelling, people intervene in history and become actors (Arendt, 1968; Young-Bruehl, 1977). Storytelling is however tied to the web of relations. Therefore, Arendt's storytelling is not subject-centred but enacted through the web of relations (Birmingham, 2002). Because the ability to make a story out of one's own life is an existential condition of being alive, there are problematic relations between personal and collective interests (Arendt, 1968; Jackson, 2013; Kristeva, 2001). Living life as a story, therefore, implies an ethical positioning as well as social structures that can counter the work of power relations (Jørgensen, 2024).

The affirmation of what made us and which we cannot escape is important. When combined with the work of Judith Butler (2015), ethics is also moved away from an anthropocentric position towards an eco-centric ethics in which people are not only answerable to the plural conditions of human existence but also to the living plural world of animals, organisms, and nature. Butler's rework of Arendt's notion of action as a speech act furthermore implies that stories are seen as lived, embodied, and material performances in which is embedded multiple human and non-human voices (Butler & Berbec, 2017; Jørgensen, 2024).

We are of-the-world as noted by Barad (2007). It works from a radical, entangled account of becoming in which it is impossible to separate this becoming from historical, spatial, and material forces. People embody these multiple forces. It follows that the others are always "in our skin" (Barad, 2007:391-392; Jørgensen & Strand, 2014:68). These others

include relations to material objects, to nature, and to the world as well as the human-to-human encounter (Dale & Latham, 2015). The entanglement between the 'I' and 'other' is therefore important for thinking ethics and freedom together.

Freedom is contingent, relational, and collective. Ethics as an act of storytelling must be thought of as a relational and collective phenomenon in which the 'I' and the 'other' – including the 'non-human other' – implicates one another. The entanglement implies storytelling relies on the conditions of possibility of its emergence, what Arendt calls the space of appearance. This is the space where people are free to tell stories together. It was found in its purest form in the ancient Greek Agora. According to Arendt, a space of appearance can emerge wherever people are together in the manner of action (Arendt, 1998:199). It is not an identifiable physical space, but can emerge anywhere where people come together. These spaces are where natality, the new beginning, can be enacted and disrupt the otherwise undisturbed motion of history.

The contribution of Arendt to business ethics thus lies in the identification of storytelling as a new beginning and in the emphasis on the spaces in which such beginnings become possible. Storytelling is the only true political action. Storytelling is also where freedom is enacted *in situ* because, for Arendt, freedom and action are the same: " [...] while one is acting, one is free – but not before or after one acts" (Arendt, 1961:196). Freedom is a performance but not any performance. Performance can be a simple doing, and people can be enacted into being by power relations (Mol, 2002). True politics is therefore also essentially different from power, because such politics requires an independent actor who thinks and judges for themself. Action is the performance of bringing something new into being (Arendt, 1961:196, 1998:178). It is through new beginnings that people disclose their uniqueness and realise their human capacity.

Freedom is therefore tied to the idea of the creative act that can leave a trace behind after physical death (Arendt, 1958). She argues that such performances are dictated by principles, which are fulfilled not in any achievement but in the completion of the act itself. In it, "the will and the deed are fused together, are one and the same thing" (Arendt, 1961:196). The will does not come before the deed but is embedded in the act itself. Freedom is thus not a predication of the principles embedded in action and does not reside in the implementation of any purpose because action – because it is collective – rarely achieves its purpose (Arendt, 1998:184). While one is acting, one is free. Not before or after.

In other words, freedom needs actualisation again and again. It does not exist as such, but emerges by beginning again through storytelling and other artful performances. We are not fully alive when we are not capable of making a story. Natality implies that the only true reason for making stories is because of life itself (Arendt, 1968:89; Didion, 2006). A true story does not have any extrinsic motivation (Kristeva, 2001). Storytelling requires a space of appearance. Therefore, the slave, the labourer, the businessman, and the foreigner do not live in a space of appearance (Arendt, 1998:199). Said otherwise, power relations embedded in organisations do not provide equal opportunities to be seen and heard. Marginalisation and exclusion, alienation, and precarity imply that

not all people have a story that is visible and confirmed within the spatialisation of organisations (Jørgensen, 2022).

6. The politics of sustainability in organisations

With the notions of storytelling and the space of appearance, Arendt provides some building blocks for an ethics of freedom in organisations and for a fundamentally different politics of sustainability. Today, sustainability is criticised for being everything and therefore nothing (Farley & Smith, 2020). Farley and Smith argue that the triple bottom line of sustainability entails that major corporations can obtain prizes for being the most sustainable companies through being the most profitable companies. In this way, these corporations actualise Milton Friedman's statement that the social responsibility of a business is to increase its profits (Friedman, 1970).

Friedman is criticised by authors, who view organisations and businesses as parts of society (Freeman et al., 2004; Waddock, 2011). I think that Friedman hits the nail on the head in defining the essence of corporations. He says out loud what is hidden or shrouded. Power normally works effectively when it is invisible and cunning and when it inclines people silently to act in particular ways – in this case, in ways in which profit becomes the primary responsibility of a business. Foucault's notion of the dispositive is a powerful concept because it examines the arrangements and networks among devices that incline certain behaviours in people, seemingly according to their own will (Abildgaard & Jørgensen, 2021; Deleuze, 1992b; Foucault, 1980; Raffnsøe et al., 2016). The dispositive captures brilliantly how power does not work through coercion but through manipulating the choices that people can possibly make.

Following Deleuze (1992a), a dispositive of control is at work in inclining a certain corporate identity when it comes to the enactment of sustainability. This is conditioned on a very different type of freedom compared to Arendt's notion of freedom, namely the freedom of the market. This story of sustainability was there from the beginning of the sustainability discourse. Farley and Smith (2020:6-7) note how there was a change from *The Club of Rome*'s emphasis on limits (Meadows et al., 1972) to the Brundtland Commission's emphasis on the needs of the poor (The World Commission, 1987). While the former emphasised maximum carrying capacity, the Brundtland Commission promoted a growth agenda through the wise and innovative use of resources. Sustainability, in other words, became a matter of technological innovation and entrepreneurship (Jørgensen, 2024:25).

Sustainability became perfectly aligned with the idea of neoliberal freedom. This is evident when the unfolding disaster of plastic pollution is transformed into a great business case by the European Commission (2018). It is manifested in new business concepts, like shared value, that emphasises how sustainability can become a competitive advantage (McAteer, 2019; Porter & Kramer, 2011). The UN report, "Better Business, Better World" (Business & Sustainability Development Commission, 2017), points out 60 problems organised around (1) food and agriculture, (2) cities, (3) energy and materials, and (4) health and well-being. These are problems that are in dire need of innovation

and entrepreneurs. On the front page of the report, an Asian man is depicted together with a boy, who I think is his son. They are in the business of circular economy, digging out the 'gold' in the form of parts that can be recycled from what appears to be old television sets.

Figure 1: Front page of the report "Better Business, Better World" (Business & Sustainability Development Commission, 2017)

Foucault (2008:225-228) pointed out how the figure of the entrepreneur is what separates neoliberalism from liberalism. Storytelling also serves an important part in the neoliberal economy in expressing the soul of the company. But the idea that a corporation has a soul is "the most terrible news in the world" (Bröckling, 2016; Deleuze, 1992a). It entails that storytelling – what Benjamin (1999) argued was among the dearest of our possessions – becomes subjected to the organising principle of neoliberalism, market, and its floating exchange rates (Deleuze, 1992a:5). When we apply for research funding for sustainability, we first must sell our souls to the devil to argue how this can be used to create economic growth. There is no money in degrowth. Arranging the funding system for higher education is part of a dispositive. Research is only 'free' if we accept its underlying market condition.

In this way, sustainability, freedom, and storytelling are disciplined, kept in order, and subjected to market laws. It is discussed in this respect how Foucault's ethics of freedom, which he conceptualised as practices of self-care, comes dangerously close to perpetuating neoliberal practices instead of resisting them (Abildgaard & Jørgensen, 2021; Bröckling, 2016; McNay, 2009). Practices of caring for the self are suddenly subjected to the need to invest in themselves for future return. In Butler's words, neoliberalism works through "entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life" (Butler, 2015:15). In this way, people are transformed from humans to "human capitals" (Brown, 2015).

7. Arendt's ethics of freedom

Arendt's ethics of freedom is an alternative to the enslavement of neoliberal freedom. For her, ethics begins with a person's relation to themself. It can therefore also be accused of perpetuating the power relations it seeks to resist. On the other hand, through storytelling and the space of appearance, we are given concepts to think of a different kind of organising that can work for sustainability. As noted, Arendt believed that true stories cannot be grounded in any extrinsic motivation. Sustainability is one of those phenomena that needs to stand by itself. We need to do sustainability for its own sake and not because it serves the economy. This moves the focus from the economy towards sustainability. This also transforms the economy into a tool and not the purpose of what organisations are doing. Through storytelling and the space of appearance, we might think of organisations as processes that can create new beginnings that can work for sustainability (Arendt, 2006).

This also entails being inspired by the old views of what it means to be a professor, a teacher, an engineer, an architect, or any other profession or vocation. Genuine storytelling is linked to the meaningfulness of what one does. We need to go back to such a view of professions and vocations as serving society and not capital interests. Working in a corporation does not relieve persons from being citizens. For Arendt, professions and vocations can be thought of as practices that create something new as well as continue traditions. A sense of pride through being involved in creating something for the sake of itself is part of what she called work (Arendt, 1998). As noted by Latour (2018), the economisation of life ridicules the past. In contrast, for Arendt (1996), it is memory and gratitude that makes life meaningful. Memory constitutes the foundation for being one with oneself, for thinking new thoughts and creating new beginnings.

Arendt underlines the importance of creativity by claiming that performances can only be judged by the criterion of greatness because their nature is to break through the commonly accepted and create something new (Arendt, 1998:205). Creative actions are for Arendt equal to political action in two interrelated ways. The first one relates directly to the action itself as a political activity. The second one relates to these performances taking place between people in the space of appearance.

In describing creative actions as political actions, she refers, among others, to Machiavelli's notion of "virtu", which is not the Roman '*virtus*' and not equal to the word 'virtue'. Instead, it corresponds to virtuosity, which "flourishes not in the creative arts but in skill in the practice of an art, and the merit of which lies in the execution of that skill" (Arendt, 1961:197). Arendt furthermore turns to the Greeks, whom whenever they wished to explain the specifics in *political activity* used comparisons such "flute-playing, dancing, the practice of medicine, the profession of seafaring – to arts, that is, in which virtuosity of the artist was the prime factor" (Arendt, 1961:197). This is the first meaning of political action. It is embedded in the performance of the art or profession itself as an enactment of one's unique appearances.

Arendt also turns to Aristotle's notion of "energeia" – actuality – which again refers to how work exhausts its full meaning in the performance itself (Arendt, 1998:206). For her, this is what is at stake in *politics*: "the work of man where work means living well" (Arendt, 1998:207). She identifies this work as 'technê' and argues that it belongs among the arts, crafts, or professions. This equals the greatest activities of people. Arendt's notion of storytelling thus gives associations to a careful, creative, and holistic image of work, which is embedded and embodied in Benjamin's classic figure of the storyteller, where the righteous man encounters himself (Benjamin, 1999:107). He located storytelling in the milieu of craftsmen, artists, and artisans (Boje, 2008; Jørgensen & Klee, 2014). It entails a more material understanding of storytelling as something done. It also emphasises the necessary intimate connections between the maker and the made, something which vanished with capitalism's proletarianisation and alienation of work. Alienation does, of course, not entail that stories do not exist. However, they become strictly expressions of 'private' experiences of people who are excluded from political participation and are used to detach themselves from the organisation (Jørgensen, 2022:60).

The second meaning of politics refers to stories being relationally and collectively enacted. This refers to how reality is crafted through the various entanglements by which we work, live, and do things together. It is in other words political in taking place between people and is thus conditioned on the space of appearance. This second meaning of politics is closely related to the first one. Action and performances need an audience before which virtuosity can be unfolded (Arendt, 1961:197). But, as noted, performance also relies on the political space because this is what provides the affordances for action. Freedom is therefore inseparable from the spaces in which people live and work. Freedom comes through a collective, historical, spatial, and material world (Jørgensen, 2022). This space of appearance is for Arendt the place where freedom can manifest itself and become a reality. It is the "mise-en-scene" for freedom to occur in virtuosity (Arendt, 1961:197-198).

7.1 How can Arendt inspire storytelling for sustainability?

Arendt's storytelling can be helpful for sustainability. My colleagues and I have attempted to posit Gaia storytelling as a conceptualisation of how to work with sustainability transitions in practice (Jørgensen et al., 2021; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025). Gaia storytelling is an umbrella term for working with stories from the love of what we, from Lovelock

and Latour, call Gaia – a metaphor for life itself as it emerges in the critical zone (Latour, 2017; Lovelock, 1995). Gaia is the name attributed to what is called the critical zone plus life. Tickell (2007:xiiv) defines Gaia as a What (critical zone) and as a Who (life).

> The What is the thin spherical shell of land and water between the incandescent interior of the Earth and the upper atmosphere surrounding it. The Who is the interacting tissue of living organisms which over four billion years has come to inhabit it.

For Latour, the image of Gaia is used to multiply the agencies we must consider when thinking about sustainability. It attunes to how we relate to nature as a process that we are part of, that we are entangled with, and that we communicate with every day (Latour, 2018). It brings our attention to soil, plant life, animal life, biodiversity on a local level and not just on a global level. He believes that we have been deceived by a planetary view of sustainability. While there are feedback mechanisms and ongoing communication among different agencies, there is no idea of bringing harmony or that nature is naturally caring. In fact, Gaia is completely unreliable and a trickster. She does not have any maternal instinct, but can destroy us at any time. Gaia is the primary actor in a climatic regime (Latour, 2018). The idea is that Gaia becomes even more predictable and treacherous the more humans interfere with Gaia's life cycles. Thus, we need to renegotiate our relations with nature. We cannot make peaceful relations with all agencies that make up the world, but we need to realise that we depend on all of them (Latour, 2018). Reconnecting with Gaia and renegotiating our relations to nature are what is at stake in sustainability work. It entails a locally grounded, spiritual, and material practice for sustainability transitions. In one model, we suggest that sustainability work can take place through four different cycles organised around what we call a Gaia theatre cycle.

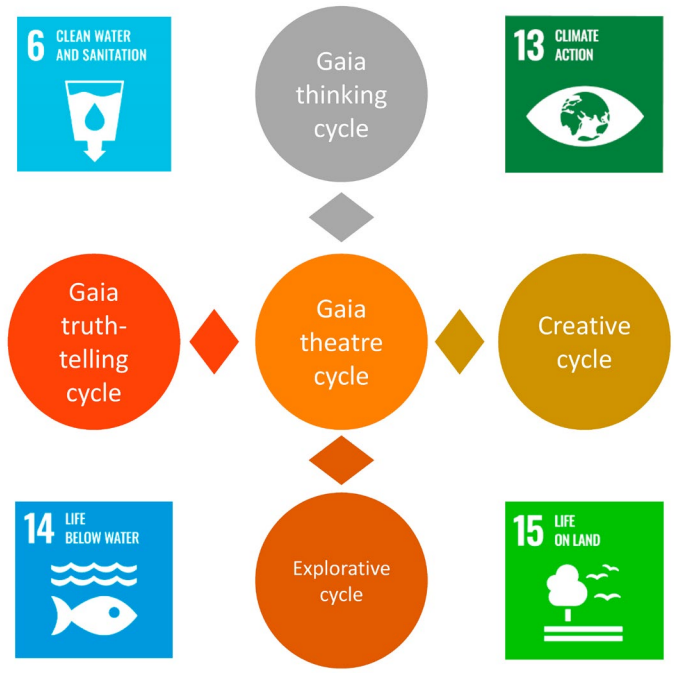

Figure 2: Five Gaia storytelling cycles (Jørgensen et al., 2021:471)

A trick apart from love of Gaia as the driving force is the idea to transform the organisation to think of itself as part of a Gaian theatre of life unfolding differently on different stages and with agents playing different roles. This is a concrete way of allowing organisations to think of how to enact spaces of appearance in ways that correspond to the different parts played by different actors. Thinking is an important condition and always needs to be part of sustainability work. Creativity corresponds to the transformation of how one relates to one's practice as an artist, an artisan, or as done with professional and vocational pride. Exploration is enacted in spaces where people meet and come together around a shared purpose. Finally, the truth-telling cycle covers the organisation's communicative relations with stakeholders. Can the organisation step forward in an honest and therefore truthful way before its stakeholders (Foucault, 2011; Tamboukou, 2012)? The love of Gaia is the driving force without which all our efforts would be fruitless. The love of Gaia is not understood as entailing an idea of living in harmony. Love is understood in Arendt's sense of the word as important for our ways of reconciling with the world as it is. The world is both hard and gentle, loving and hostile, wicked and divine, ugly and beautiful (Arendt, 1996; Roodt, 2005). Love however also implies apprehending diversity and plurality and thus entail a spiritual connection to all the other lives of this world, which need to live as well as possible (Bellacasa, 2017). It is noteworthy that spirituality, according to Foucault (2005), fell in value compared to the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the subsequent economisation of life. Today, natural scientists are beginning to look for what we can learn from Indigenous knowledge and wisdom (Enevoldsen et al., 2024). Storytelling implies spirituality in being where we connect our lives and practices to other lives. Without storytelling, we can never be fully alive.

This is not a sequential model. Rather, the different cycles are entangled and mutually condition each other. The term 'cycle' furthermore denotes that the work on sustainability needs to be recurrent but should also adapt to changing problems and contexts. It can never work without thinking, imagination, and curiosity. Sustainability work is a process. The model collects our ideas of how to organise so that the imagination can go visiting (Haraway, 2016) to create other futures. Paradoxically, this is also done through revisiting the past, what Arendt calls pearl diving into the past, to find what can inspire new ways of being and becoming (Arendt, 1999). The ancient Greek Agora is such a pearl. Benjamin's (1999) storyteller is another pearl. Spirituality is a third pearl. Truth as honesty is a fourth pearl. The pearl in the middle is, of course, Gaia.

The model challenges politics organised according to neoliberal capitalism. A starting point is that sustainability is already there in the hearts and minds of people. It has however been pushed away by other economic concerns that have institutionalised in dominant language, practices, and politics (Jørgensen & Boje, 2010). But there are alternatives to dominant narratives. Through these five cycles, it is possible to disrupt and create new mutations that, over time, can change or even overthrow unsustainable ways of doing things. The five cycles are also insertions into a complex political world where other forces are present. I am aware that actions never achieve their purpose. Change towards sustainability is a question of love and imagination, but also of what is possible in the given moment.

8. Conclusion

The article has proposed an ethics of freedom to engage in the politics of storytelling for sustainability in organisations. Arendt's notion of storytelling as a new beginning and her understanding of how this connects with spatial conditions are critical contributions to business ethics. True storytelling is where freedom is enacted in practice. This freedom is relational and contingent on the plurality that is the world, and which is the condition of people's becoming. Storytelling involves a political stance and judgement. Just as thinking requires action, action also requires thinking to attend to how the world is framed and reorganised when we act. The plurality of the existence of human and non-human lives is the ultimate authority to which one is responsible and answerable. It is a condition we cannot escape.

The responsibility for the plurality of lives needs confirmation in thinking and action. I have not discussed this last aspect in this article. Storytelling for sustainability implies spirituality because it is through extending ourselves in time and space that we connect our lives to the lives of others and can imagine other ways of living and becoming. Storytelling and the space of appearance allow imagining new processes of organising that afford creativity, transformation, and unique appearances. Organisations can become spaces where people can act together and create great stories. This however requires a reorganisation and redistribution of power in a real and material sense where people are granted better possibilities to think and to act responsibly.

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Stories of African dreamers: The Business Ethics Network of Africa (BEN-Africa)

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***NOTE**: All grey-shaded text is by the narrator, Bryan Robinson*

BEN-Africa has rather a unique story. An organisation established in 1999 with the aspiration of furthering business ethics on the African continent, it has evolved into a respected entity that provides various fora to collaborate, discuss, and promote business ethics. Activities include seminars and webinars, publication of the respectable *African Journal of Business Ethics*, awarding of the Order of the Baobab, and the annual BEN-Africa Conference. But the real BEN-Africa story lies with the organisation's members, volunteers, and leaders. Here are their stories.

It is apt to begin this story with reflections from the founding president of BEN-Africa and past chairperson of the BEN-Africa Advisory Board, Deon Rossouw.

1. My story of BEN-Africa

Prof. Deon Rossouw, Founding President of BEN-Africa

The story of BEN-Africa dates back to 1999, when representatives from 14 African countries convened on the equator in Uganda on the campus of the Uganda Martyrs University for a conference on the theme of fraud and the African Renaissance. The idea of the conference was born in Japan in 1996, when I participated in a panel session on International Business Ethics at the First World Congress of the International Society of Business, Economics and Ethics (ISBEE) in Tokyo. I was asked by the moderator of that panel session to deliver a paper on business ethics in Africa. My response to him was that I have a rudimentary understanding of what is happening in the field of business ethics in my home country (South Africa), but I have no idea what, if anything, is happening on the rest of the

continent. We therefore agreed that I would contribute a paper on business ethics in South Africa. It was exactly that question of what is happening in the field of business ethics on the African continent that sparked the idea to start a continent-wide conversation on business ethics in Africa.

The first step was to organise a conference in Uganda in 1999, driven by the hidden agenda of testing the appetite of participants to establish a continental network of people who are interested in business ethics. While staying in the student residences of the newly established Uganda Martyrs University – with cold showers and wonderful local food – the participants were unanimous in their resolve at the end of the conference that a continental network for business ethics should be formed.

One year later, that resolve came to fruition when a group of about 20 persons met at a hotel in the heart of Nairobi for the founding conference of what would be incorporated as the Business Ethics Network of Africa (BEN-Africa). A constitution was adopted, and a decision was taken to hold a conference of BEN-Africa annually. It was decided that the conference should be held at different locations across the continent to stimulate the development of business ethics in the country where the conference was taking place. The first executive committee of BEN-Africa was also elected, with me as the founding president and Prof. Coley Lamprecht as the first secretary-general of BEN-Africa.

Over the next four years, conferences were held in interesting places like East London, South Africa (2001), Lagos, Nigeria (2002), Victoria Falls, Zambia (2003), and Stone Town, Zanzibar (2004). It was satisfying and exhilarating to see how the network of people on our continent who share an academic or practitioner interest in business ethics started to expand.

Towards the end of the four-year term of the first executive committee of BEN-Africa, the founding secretary-general was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. This was a blow to BEN-Africa as he worked relentlessly to build and expand the business ethics network on the African continent. Shortly before the election of the second executive committee, a special ceremony was held to honour the first secretary-general for his selfless contribution to laying the foundations of BEN-Africa. For this occasion, the first book in the BEN-Africa Book Series was dedicated to him. The title of the book is *Developing Business Ethics as an Academic Field*, written by myself. On the dedication page, the following sentence appears: "In appreciation of his relentless efforts to give BEN-Africa wings".

Almost a quarter of a century later, it is gratifying to see how BEN-Africa has spread its wings. And to see how it is still soaring ever further and higher under the deep blue African skies.

The BEN-Africa logo is a baobab tree, but why was the baobab tree chosen? Well, perhaps Arnold Smit will shed some light on the reason.

2. A community of imagination

Prof. Arnold Smit, BEN-Africa President, 2013-2016

Imagine the small beginnings of a non-profit organisation driven by the conviction that the development of ethical capacity can make a continental impact. Imagine that this organisation would be steered by volunteers weaving an ever-expanding continental network of collaboration in thought leadership and research outputs. Imagine, further, that funds would never be guaranteed and that every undertaking, be it a workshop, conference, or publication, could turn out to be a financial liability. Who could imagine that 25 years later, this organisation would still be around, living its vision and expanding its influence?

BEN-Africa is a story of imagination. It is a story that gets re-enacted year after year, conference after conference, research paper after research paper. Behind every conference, there is a president and executive team imagining a getting together of the network that will make an inspiring difference and lasting impact on how business ethics is done on the African continent and beyond. Behind every paper submission and thought leadership contribution, there is an individual – sometimes more than one – imagining how ethics can make a difference in how leadership is practised, organisations are developed, or societies can be strengthened.

BEN-Africa is imagination in action because of what ethics essentially is about. Ethics is about practising moral imagination. While the ethics discussion is mostly prompted by wrongful decisions and behaviours, the ethical orientation is problem-solving in the interest of the common good. The imaginary power of ethics is released when we realise that moral adversity can be overcome.

Standing tall in the imagination of BEN-Africa is the baobab tree. From the beginning, the organisation's originators embraced the baobab as symbolic of what the network would stand for. I was not present at the time, but the baobab keeps on rekindling my moral imagination too. I associate the baobab with an almost mysterious longevity and resilience, tall and recognisable as it towers above the African landscape, clearly distinguishable from other trees. The baobab also holds cultural and spiritual significance in many African societies as it is often the site of communal gatherings, storytelling, and rituals. So, we can perhaps describe BEN-Africans as the community of the baobab.

And so, in my time as president of BEN-Africa, we started wondering about fellow Africans who exemplify for us ethical imagination in action, standing tall in society like baobabs. We decided to create an award, the Order of the Baobab. This was not just to honour them for their achievement and what they represent for us, but also a reminder to ourselves that ethical imagination is possible and impactful. Ethical imagination drives change, makes turnarounds possible, and creates better conditions for human and environmental flourishing. Over time, BEN-Africa's 'forest' of baobabs became populated by people who inspired new thinking and practices on the social responsibility of business, the integrity of public servants, governance for the common good, the exposure of corruption, the mentoring of future ethical leaders, and the building of an ethical society.

Imagine a baobab exceeding 2,000 years in age. Imagine a long-living BEN-Africa, now only 25 years old, continuously overcoming the perennial challenges to its existence while providing moral sustenance for those who come together to re-enact their dream of ethical organisations and societies in their sphere of influence and responsibility.

Another analogy used to describe BEN-Africa is the African drumbeat. Symphorien Ntibagirirwa, a long-time friend of BEN-Africa, narrates how the Burundian Drums at the BEN-Africa Conference resonate with the mission of the organisation. He begins by depicting a visit by Bryan Robinson (a wanderer) to Rwanda and Burundi for research and to investigate whether Kigali would be a good choice for the 2022 Conference. It was.

3. Drummers' drums from a thousand hills: Wonders of the wandering BEN-Africa

Prof. Symphorien Ntibagirirwa, BEN-Africa Networking Council Member

Sometime in 2021, then in 2022 in Rwanda, I met a special tourist. I have never taken an interest in tourism, often seeing tourists as people of some kind! Well! One of the tourists took me along as he was interested in the situation of business ethics in Burundi and Rwanda. His story seemed that of a forerunner for a wandering, a so-promising organisation which has been wandering all over Africa, taking interest in making itself known, dealing with dangerous issues of ethics of business and economic ethics … BEN-Africa or bene-Afrika (a colloquial term)! A friend of mine asked me if 'BEN-Africa' means sons and daughters of Africa. Yeah! But no! It is a business ethics network in Africa (BEN-Africa), run by the sons and daughters of Africa, that is, people of Africa (bene Afrika in Burundian and Rwandan languages) … Yeess! So, it goes everywhere in Africa because it concerns everyone!!! It also deals with issues of business and the economy, which concern everyone!

After touring many African countries, BEN-Africa was now wandering in Rwanda, where it was going to hold its 21st Annual Conference in 2022! A country where tourism is on the rise! But also a country which is becoming a busy-bee business hub in the East African Community (EAC) and even in the whole of Africa. So, everyone was wondering what the BEN-Africa of bene-Afrika is coming to do in Rwanda; what was going to be its business in Rwanda? They came and they saw. Surprising theme to them … Society, Rights and Business Ethics … There are always questions where the question of rights is posed! Businesses are bothered when the issue of ethics is raised! Well! Let them face it as it drums!

On the conference evening of drums, drums resonated, calling each one's attention, even those who were deep sleeping in the Hills of the Thousand Hills, even in the Hotel Thousand Hills. Drums to entertain tourists! Yeah! No! Not only! They are the drums by which BEN-Africa creates a climate of joy to tell ethical stories, the stories of *ubuntu* that matter for BEN-Africa. Listen to the sound! Look as they jump! They jump higher as the sound of the drums increases … Oh my word…! The sound of the drums recalled the *ubuntu* of the ancestors, the living-dead, people of truth and integrity, people of morals

and rightness; the same *ubuntu* that is to be the characteristic mark of the business of the living of the current time, our time and the time to come! As the drums resonated, the drummers jumped high and higher to remind that businesses with integrity rank higher and will be seen above the hills which hide the stories of immoral mining of mineral resources of the Central African Region. As the drums resonated, the drummers were increasingly energised and energising, a reminder that business with ethics and integrity is sustained and sustainable business. Yeah! The culture of drums reminds the culture of ethics and integrity in business.

Dance the drums, bene-Africa, let BEN-Africa resonate the drums of sound ethical business! Let BEN-Africa resonate with the drums of the sound of sustainability. Let the young ones be trained in ethics and integrity in the country of a thousand hills and in the country of a thousand and one hills!

As you read through these stories, you may be asking yourself, "Why should an entity such as BEN-Africa, even exist ... is it another aspirational organisation with little impact?" Divya Singh recounts her initial scepticism when asked to join the BEN-Africa Advisory Board and the reason she ultimately decided to join as a member.

4. Believing in a better continental future

Prof. Divya Singh, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

"Are you interested in joining the Advisory Board?" asked the chairperson, a person for whom I had, and have, the utmost respect for his moral courage and vision. Because the invitation came from him, I was flattered, but I was still hesitant. The organisation was a mystery. Its mission was described as "strengthening the commitment and competence of Africans to do business with moral integrity by facilitating interaction between academics and practitioners who share an interest in business ethics". I wasn't sure what that meant and I did wonder whether this was just another academic talk shop. However, the one thing that resonated was the way the chairperson, Prof. Deon Rossouw, spoke. His belief and conviction in the ability of BEN-Africa to make a difference, to promote change towards an ethical business culture in Africa, was palpable. I agreed to attend a meeting of the BEN-Africa Advisory Board as an observer to see if there was any meeting of the minds.

And there I met the other board members, and I was sold. While I cannot recall who said it, or even if it was just one person's voice ... but the overwhelming purpose and commitment that I heard and saw during that first engagement was epitomised in the real belief that BEN-Africa was there to describe what's possible, without being overly idealistic or optimistic ... just reasonably believing in a better continental future. That was my song!

Over the years and many meetings later, I have heard that same sentiment again and again, reminding us of what BEN-Africa stands for. There were times when stronger reminders were essential because there were potholes in the road and unexpected blind

rises, but the unwavering trust of everyone involved in the organisation has been a lesson in resilience, forward-thinking, and understanding the importance and value of small wins.

My story with BEN-Africa is the tale of learning to see different worlds – sometimes just in glimpses – but for that moment. it was enough. I learned to embrace the positive rather than continually bemoan that which was wrong. BEN-Africa demanded more than my skills; it demanded my growth as we sought to create answers that would support the organisational vision.

My colleagues on the advisory board weren't all typical corporate suits. It was a diverse tapestry of people: academics, community organisers, human rights activists, and a couple of corporates who believed in the organisational mission. Each seemed driven by a common sense of purpose – Why am I here? What is my value? What can I contribute to the shared mission of the organisation? Every meeting was different, the discussions varied, and every interaction stretched my perspective, often challenging me to rethink my contributions. However, most inspiring was the collegiality among the board members. Every member was offered an equal voice, and with that, even the newbies like me felt safe to share an opinion. I never felt the need to prove myself because all opinions were received with interest and respect.

My journey with BEN-Africa was about venturing into new spaces and being open to different ways of doing; about the remarkable value of a diverse team where each one of us contributed to and leveraged off the strengths and expertise of others, but most of all, it was about the power of belief. The organisation's mission, once opaque, has sharpened as I learned to engage with the various issues and learn from every one of my colleagues. Immersing myself in my colleagues' collective wisdom and experience, I realise how I have grown as a person and a leader. I realise today that sometimes, believing in a person – or even just an idea – isn't always about logic ... it's about courage, and when courage meets opportunity, the results can be incredible. Four lessons from my tenure on the BEN-Africa Advisory Board that are permanent resources in my toolkit:

- Start with trust: Assume good intentions in every interaction.
- Listen carefully: Hear not just the words, but the ideas and emotions behind them.
- Build a diverse team: Success is not about individual brilliance but collective resilience.
- Celebrate success: Recognise everyone's contributions, big and small.

BEN-Africa has a range of activities, including publishing the *African Journal of Business Ethics* and organising the flagship BEN-Africa Conference. The conference holds a special meaning to all those who attend, and some of these reflections are detailed by BEN-Africa members and the executive team. Celia Lourens begins by reflecting on the networking and friendships (and fun) that start and grow during the annual conference.

5. My BEN-Africa journey, which started in 2016

Ms Celia Lourens, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

BEN-Africa reflects the art of convening like-minded individuals and embraces cultural immersion and friendship bonds for life. My first introduction to BEN-Africa was in 2016, when the reigning president of the executive committee, Dr Liezl Groenewald, asked if I would mind assisting with the annual conference in Maputo, given the existing relationship between BEN-Africa and The Ethics Institute. This was merely the beginning of many enriching experiences and friendships as part of the BEN-Africa family.

After Maputo and a virtual conference, thanks to Covid-19, the conference was hosted in Swakopmund, Namibia, with so many firsts. This conference was exceptional, with profound hospitality by the Namibian people. The conference venue was packed as probably one of the first in-person post-Covid-19 events in Africa and it allowed us to network in earnest once again.

The beauty of Namibia enticed some delegates to explore beyond the conference walls. The abundant ocean and Namib desert cared to show their uniqueness with flair. Namibia's successful conference in 2021 was a tough one to beat, yet Rwanda did it with so much grace and style.

Although the learning and engagement in person during the Rwandan conference was spectacular, it is what happened at the networking reception and after the conference activities that left delegates with a strong bond with one another. We learned about the severity of the genocide and how this impacted the beautiful people of Rwanda. We explored Kigali on a motorbike taxi tour, which was unforgettable. The immersion in the cultural lifestyle and local cuisine, and tasting banana beer (truly an acquired taste), ensured friendship bonds were secured forever. The rhythm of the drums got our delegates dancing and enjoying themselves with our Rwandan performers. We think, therefore, we are better together.

There are so many spectacular moments during a BEN-Africa conference. These are impossible to capture properly and accurately reflect the value the network offers participants. My journey with BEN-Africa is far from complete, as the fondest memories and friendships are yet to be made. BEN-Africa does that. It brings you into the network. It offers the opportunity to let the academic within benefit from learning, the practitioner to share experiences, and the person to reconnect with beautiful African people and their natural beauty.

Join us on this meaningful journey where ethicists, academics, practitioners, and friends connect across the African continent.

BEN-Africa has always prioritised the youth and supported emerging researchers, and thus plays an important role in ensuring a new generation of business ethicists is in the making. Molly Ogunyemi explains her recent journey with BEN-Africa.

6. We met in the land of a thousand hills: BEN-Africa 2022

Dr Omowumi (Molly) Ogunyemi, BEN-Africa Member

In the not-so-little city of Lagos, a young academic sat in her office, preparing her usual ethics classes while thinking of her next steps for research and collaboration. Unknown to her, an African organisation with its headquarters somewhere in the south sought to engage talents from across the continent to foster collaborations in the quest to build ethical businesses that make the African economy stronger and vibrant. Such were the plans of the BEN-Africa 2022 conference, unknown to our academic until her phone rang, and a colleague asked if she would be interested in participating in that conference. The conference brought together scholars, teachers, and practitioners representing various geographical and cultural zones of Africa, all with a mission to strengthen their work on ethics education.

It was not the first time BEN-Africa brought people together, but this time it would be in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The venue was Kigali, at the famous Hôtel des Mille Collines. There, they gathered experts from various fields, from north and south, east and west, African educational leaders at the forefront of positive change, prepared to change the continent classroom by classroom. The dates were in November, and the year was 2022. Speaking different languages yet understanding each other. The task ahead was daunting, but the optimism was palpable.

The BEN-Africa conference in Kigali, Rwanda, was memorable for a number of reasons. The diversity of participants was impressive, and their openness to collaboration was mind-blowing. The display of culture, one Africa, all geared towards promoting a flourishing continent. Everyone introduced themselves, shared their experiences, and participated actively in the interactive sessions. Our young academic found a network of experts who were more friends than colleagues. They shared knowledge freely and treated each other with respect.

All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, and all intellectual discussions and no entertainment would make any gathering dull. It was such a pleasure to have traditional dancers perform at the conference cocktail.

Two years have passed, new colleagues have been found, they have kept in touch, and the collaboration continues. Participants invite each other to speak in-person or virtually at conferences, participating from their home countries. The future of BEN-Africa is bright. The land is studded with jewels, not of the material kind, but of a more important kind: humans with the common good at heart. Many more scholars can hope to discover this vibrant community of jewels spread over the lands of Africa. The next meeting point was in South Africa, and thanks to technology, those who could not attend physically participated online.

The most recent encounter was in West Africa, in Accra, Ghana. Just as colourful as the conferences before. As warm-hearted as two years ago, our young scholar meets her team again. And yes, they are now her team. BEN-Africa has grown, and not only in

numbers. As the old members greet the new, memories and flashbacks now and again pass fleetingly in the mind of our Nigerian academic. Familiar faces and strangers who will soon become her friends and team. During the hustle and bustle of the cocktail evening, people still find a way to talk above the loud music. Someone asked our young Nigerian academic how she ended up with BEN-Africa and its wonderful conferences. Her response began thus: We met in the land of many hills: Kigali, Rwanda.

Every conference is unique and special in its own way. They almost certainly all have challenges, highlights, and successes – the failures are buried under hysterical laughter. Luyolo Mahlangabeza describes some of these during the 2024 Absa BEN-Africa Conference in Accra, Ghana.

7. BEN-Africa: A story of unintended consequences

Mr Luyolo Mahlangabeza, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

BEN-Africa is a networking organisation that facilitates interaction and initiates research in business ethics among its members. One of the ways it furthers research is through conferences and seminars. BEN-Africa conferences are a story of human development with an unwavering disposition towards rigorous peer review while supporting novice and experienced researchers in business ethics. The 24th Annual Absa BEN-Africa Conference held in Accra, Ghana, in November 2024 was an exemplary example of this!

Usually, conferences are organised by a couple of people or a small committee of individuals, and this is very helpful in getting things done, limiting loose ends and minimising chaos that can ensue when there are too many cooks in the kitchen. The Ghana conference was a much different story. There was not just one organising committee, but three conference organising committees. One was made up of the executive members of BEN-Africa, the other of local partner Ghana Communication Technology University members, and the third of the conference sponsors, Absa Group. Such a concoction of conference organising committee members proved a stroke of genius!

It ensured commitment, sharing of responsibilities, and, most of all, human development. You see, many of the various committee members involved in organising the conference had never done so before, but were armed with enthusiasm second to none. After the resoundingly successful conference, it was clear that many of these individuals were now well equipped with practical skills to organise international events, thus confirming their personal and career development from the experience. A story of unintended consequences! But that's not all of the human development that BEN-Africa touched on.

The call for submissions went out as early as April 2024, with 12 August 2024 being the deadline for abstract submissions. This normally allows for a smooth peer review process. Generally, though, this closes the door on whoever could or even might make a last-minute submission, due to funding issues, etc. Lo and behold, 10 days prior to the start of the conference, the Scientific Conference Programme Chair responsible for handling the review process was inundated with over 15 last-minute submissions. Where does one

find reviewers willing to thoroughly review so many submissions in such a short space of time? Needless to say, all submissions were accommodated, and authors were given critical feedback within just three days. In the end, 47 submissions were accepted.

Among the authors were many PhD students, who, importantly, needed a platform to communicate their research findings and gain experience in presenting at international forums. The conference even had a French panel dedicated to the francophone delegates (BEN-Africa conferences allow submissions in all languages spoken on the continent). In the end, there were 101 attendees: 21 from the sponsor, 29 from Ghana Communication Technology University, and others coming as far south as the University of Melbourne in Australia or as far north as Helsinki in Finland. Notably, all 29 Ghana Communication Technology University delegates were sponsored by BEN-Africa and did not pay a single cent for registration. The conference was also held in a hybrid format, accommodating those who could not make it in person to Accra, Ghana. An unintended consequence of human development drawing from BEN-Africa's ability to overcome obstacles and doing so with charm, academic rigour, and flexibility. Indeed, BEN-Africa is a story of human development, the unintended consequences version!

With there having been 23 BEN-Africa Conferences held to date, there are many BEN-African stories of the various conferences dating back as far as 2000 when the first conference was held. Kemi Ogunyemi takes us back in history to the 13th BEN-Africa Conference held in Lagos, Nigeria. As a young academic, thrown into the fray, the challenges were many, but the experience also left many beautiful memories.

8. Memories of BEN-Africa

Prof. Kemi Ogunyemi, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

Almost a dozen years have passed since we last had BEN-Africa visit Lagos, Nigeria, and this opportunity to tell my story about BEN-Africa has afforded me a chance to reminisce about the event. Before that occasion, BEN-Africa had been hosted by Lagos Business School (LBS) in 2002, but I had not yet joined the institution. Indeed, the world of academia had not yet featured in my career dreams.

When the possibility of hosting the event at LBS was first raised, I was daunted by the thought of what it would entail to organise it – publicity, registrations, paper presentation scheduling, visas for those coming from outside of the country, recommendations for accommodation and logistics, speakers for the different activities, venues to be booked within and outside LBS, printing and purchasing of conference materials, industry visits (dubbed learning journeys), and a bit of sight-seeing … it all seemed a lot! This was perhaps initially because I was mostly sick in bed during the previous conference, during which Nigeria was considered and provisionally accepted as the next location. And then, on the same weekend of the conference, I was to defend my PhD thesis, accompanied by my supervisor, Domenec Mele, who would also attend the conference. In all, it seemed crazy to take on the task, but eventually, everything went extremely well, partly due to the

great support from Prof. Arnold Smit, who was president of BEN-Africa at the time. The local planning committee consisted of Rose Ogbechie, Dupe Akin-Olaitan, and myself.

The committee met again and again, trying to ensure a successful conference that would bring together academics and practitioners committed to fostering ethical business conduct in Africa and combine theoretical and practical perspectives in the best way possible. In the months preceding the event, we were kept busy chasing sponsors and speakers, setting up the locations and logistics for the learning journeys, drafting press releases to be published periodically in the papers, and sending people to the various universities in the country to put up posters and to invite faculty individually and collectively – thanks to Ronke Adeboye, Michael Ihekwoaba, and Esther Ojo for the astounding amount of legwork. I well remember the thrill of getting sponsorship commitments from Seawolf Nigeria Ltd., Unilever Nigeria Plc., and the Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics at LBS. I remember visiting all the possible hotels with Nnenna Ihechu to select those that would qualify as options for our guests. That was fun until it became tiring. It was a frenzied period, those months of preparation, but I see in my email trails that I still managed to notice that the BEN-Africa Information Sheet had me listed as representing South Africa in the organisation's executive committee and shot off an email asking, "Please rectify – before my Dean fires me. :)."

On the scene-setting panel that opened the conference by putting forward the contemporary issues in business ethics in Nigeria and Africa for discussion, we had Deon Rossouw, Juan Elegido, Remi Okunlola, and Deji Delano. Then followed the parallel paper sessions which featured thought-provoking research presentations. One of the most eye-opening sessions was the keynote by Fabian Ajogwu on 'Public Service, Ethics and Institutional Reforms: The Inextricable Link'. The two other brilliant keynotes were 'Ethical and Management Issues in Questions about Payments' by Juan Elegido and 'Challenges to the Practice of Ethics in the Nigerian Business Terrain' by Pat Utomi. Subsequently, we thoroughly enjoyed the three practitioner forums, one on 'CSR for HR Practitioners', organised by Dapo Adeleye, Chris Ogbechie, and Kenneth Amaeshi, one on 'Recognising the Human Dignity of the Employee', organised by the Corporate Action Working Group (headed by Rose Ogbechie) of the Nigerian chapter of the Humanistic Management Network, and one on 'Critical Partnerships: Driving Government and Private Sector Collaboration on Education', led by Tolulope Agiri and Kelechi Okeahialam. Finally, Franca Ovadje coordinated the very interesting 'Private Public Sector Dialogue with Academics: Ethics in Leadership' segment, which featured Okey Enelamah and Udom Inoyo among the panellists.

The participants thoroughly enjoyed the learning journeys to the Chair Centre, Nike Art Gallery, Falcon Petroleum Ltd, and Nigerian Association for Women's Advancement. They talked excitedly about their takeaways during the cocktail and dinner at which they all converged afterwards. Overall, the conference introduced a good number of the 2,013 participants to BEN-Africa and its ideals, fostered meaningful connections among them and paved the way for various collaborations that contribute to promoting the scholarship and practice of ethics in Africa. For those of us involved in organising it,

we grew with the experience and valued the opportunity to serve. By the end of the conference, I had not only done well in my thesis defence and earned my doctorate, but I had also hosted an international event for the first time, made new friends from within and outside of the country, and added the scenes from BEN-Africa in Nigeria to my cache of beautiful memories of BEN-Africa in Tanzania and Uganda.

The BEN-Africa conference provides an opportunity for participants to have difficult conversations on business ethics, which hopefully go beyond the conference and infiltrate conversations at work, at home, and elsewhere. Creating a safe space for such conversations is valued by many delegates attending BEN-Africa conferences.

9. BEN-Africa conferences: An ethics and integrity oasis

Ms Jovita Fazenda, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

> Oasis: "A place in a desert where there is water and therefore plants and trees and sometimes a village or town; a calm, pleasant place in the middle of somewhere busy and unpleasant" (source: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/oasis)

I hope those who work in and are passionate about ethics will quickly understand why I chose to define the BEN-Africa conference as an oasis and, who knows, relate to this feeling.

BEN-Africa and the yearly conferences are, for me, an oasis.

Years ago, I attended a BEN-Africa conference for the first time in Mozambique, where I was invited to speak about business ethics and the Mozambican context. That was my first experience as a speaker for a large audience. I have to say that I had no idea what journey I was about to embark on.

At that first attendance at a BEN-Africa conference, I found my OASIS.

Every ethicist, and I dare to add here, anticorruption professional, will in one way or another, share their experience of solitude in this field. They will have several episodes they can share where their voice is a lone voice in reasoning decisions, attitudes, habits, and cultural discussions; where their arguments are equated to fairytale dreams and non-realistic; and where their idealism is downplayed and sometimes even laughed at.

Being an ethics professional requires the courage to start hard conversations at almost every business interaction, be the dissenting voice in board rooms, and always bring about the conversation about the right thing to do rather than the profitability approach.

For all these battles and daily conflicts, finding a conference (a place) of like-minded professionals, a place where, for once, the argument is not so much about convincing people of the validity of ethics as a condition *sine qua non* for business sustainability, but it's a knowledge and experience sharing opportunity that makes one feel precisely like having arrived at an oasis after a long journey in a desert.

The conferences are always inspiring and full of 'ah-hah' moments, where someone's sharing rings a bell, connects a dot, plants a new seed, or sheds some light on that nagging worry or unanswered question. It is an opportunity once a year to evaluate how the effort to effect change in our humble small areas of influence as professionals are not so isolated and that we are part of a broader collective, that our battles are not so lonely, that although we may not see and feel it every day, there is a sea of people driving ideas and fighting for a better business, economic, and social environment.

Yes, the BEN-Africa conference is an OASIS from where I yearly take a refreshing sip of energy for yet another 12 months of holding high the business ethics and anticorruption flag.

The BEN-Africa story would not be true if it didn't have a dark side, a villain. In this case, Bryan Robinson tells a fairytale which may or may not be founded on fact, and provides some lessons for partnerships between the good and bad.

10. The dark side to the story: Whitewashing the taint

Dr Bryan Robinson: BEN-Africa President

Once upon a time, there were a couple of good people who started a network to do good things. It happened to be that their focus was on furthering good business ethics in Africa. These good people wore rose-coloured glasses and believed that businesses and their leaders wanted to do good things.

The network of good people held seminars and conferences for good people and good entities and awarded good people for doing good. It even published a journal that published what good people had researched on the topic.

One year, these good people convened a conference in an idyllic little village in a beautiful African country. It was going to be the best conference yet, believed the president of the good network. So many good people had registered for the conference from across Africa, and paper submissions by good people were, well, good.

To make such an international conference a great success, the president and his people began approaching many good businesses to sponsor some good money to invest in the event. The network was a non-profit, volunteer network, but conferences cost good money, and good money is needed to publish its journal and administer the network.

One good business was excited to be associated with the conference. You see, this company was a state-owned business, and the association with a network of good people would put their business in a very good light, and good publicity would contribute to their financial worth. And they wanted to be seen as a good business. Perhaps they even believed they were good people running a good business.

Back to the good conference. At this conference, the president and his people deliberated on whom they should recognise for doing good in Africa, and they were keen to nominate a person who had done good in the host country. It was not difficult to find such a

person. For, you see, there was a person from a multi-national business based in the Global North who had uncovered bad stuff happening in the business. His business had been colluding with bad people in government in Africa to do bad things for lots of good money. This person had exposed the bad for good.

Everyone was excited about the selection of such a good person to be recognised for such a good deed. The president of the network was, therefore, very surprised when he received an email from the state-owned business, the sponsor of the conference. The people at the state-owned business were not at all happy with the selection of the good person who had done good for the country by exposing bad people in government. The president of the network was told he was very naughty to have selected the good person for the award. The people of the state-owned enterprises said that he should withdraw the nomination, or they would withdraw their good money from the conference.

To side-step a bit: State-owned enterprises are good for socio-economic development in developing nations. Through public funding, these businesses are provided with the means to embark on large infrastructural projects or provide social services. Sometimes, state actors remain quite active in the affairs of these state-owned enterprises. Could this be why the state-owned business wanted to withdraw their good money due to the influence of bad people in government? Who knows?

The president of the network had a cadenza, as this was an ethical dilemma he was not expecting. Should the network take the good money and forsake the good person, but would that not be bad? Or forsake the good money for the good person, but that would forsake the good conference for good people, and therefore, the good person would not be recognised as the conference could not take place without good money.

The president consulted with many good people, and the only good decision would be to forsake the good money, the good conference, and the good person, thereby maintaining the integrity of the network of good people. Before doing this, the president found and appealed to one good person in the state-owned business to intervene. This good person, and it was a very good person, appealed not to the moral integrity of the leadership of the state-owned business, as this seemed to be lacking, but to reason. If the state-owned business withdrew their good money, they would receive very bad publicity, which would cost them good money. The business elected to continue with the sponsorship, the conference continued, and the good person was awarded for the good he had done.

The good people in the network removed their rose-coloured glasses and now understand that not all businesses want to do good things.

Care is such an important virtue of the people involved in BEN-Africa. Liezl Groenewald explains how concern for a whistleblower demonstrated the deep caring of BEN-Africa delegates at a conference held in Mombasa.

11. The weight of truth

Dr Liezl Groenewald, BEN-Africa Past-President

Pole ni dawa – Concern is like medicine (African proverb)

8 November 2019. Mombasa, Kenya. Another excellent BEN-Africa Annual Conference. The conference venue was packed, and attendees waited in anticipation for the next speaker, a prominent whistleblower who would speak in public about her ordeal for the first time.

Her reputation preceded her – a courageous truth-teller who had exposed corruption in what became known as 'state capture' in South Africa and paid a steep price for her integrity. The conference had drawn people eager to hear first-hand from someone who had dared to challenge the status quo.

She started talking, not from a paper or PowerPoint presentation, but from her heart, her voice initially steady but tinged with emotion. She described her early days as the CEO of a company and the excitement of landing this prestigious job. Her words painted a picture of hope and ambition that resonated with the audience.

But then she shifted gears, recounting the moment she realised that she was receiving questionable instructions from a director of the company. The room grew quieter; the atmosphere was heavy with anticipation. She explained her internal struggle – her loyalty to her employer clashing with her commitment to the truth. After three months, she resigned.

She shared how her life fell apart afterwards. The doubt in herself, the sleepless nights, the tense atmosphere at home. After 18 months, she could no longer remain silent. She gathered herself and blew the whistle on the corruption she had witnessed at her former employer. By this time, her voice was barely audible, and her tears were flowing freely. I handed her one tissue after the other. One could hear a pin drop in the room as the audience was transfixed by her story. I scanned the room and noticed people searching their handbags for their own tissues to wipe away their tears.

But she pressed on, laying bare the personal toll her whistleblowing had exacted: the isolation, the financial struggles, and the strain on her mental health. She shared how she was blacklisted and labelled as a troublemaker. She told the audience how friends distanced themselves, and even her family questioned whether she should have just kept quiet. "I would sit in my house, wondering if I had made a mistake," she admitted. "Was I foolish to think one person could make a difference?"

The weight of her words filled the air when she ended with, "Whistleblowing is often portrayed as heroic, and while there is truth to that, it's also deeply lonely. It's messy, painful, and full of sacrifices that most people will never see."

As she finished, the room was silent. She looked out at the audience, bracing herself for their reactions. The first hand raised came from an older man near the back who thanked

her for her courage. More words of praise followed, punctuated with a few questions. The session ended with a prolonged standing ovation for this brave woman.

As I walked her out of the conference venue, she told me that for all the pain she had endured, moments like this reminded her why she had spoken out.

As the African proverb states: "Concern is like medicine". The proverb refers to the notion that when we show concern for others, they will feel better emotionally. We can agree that when someone reaches out to us in a time of distress, we feel touched. The show of care, even if it does not solve the real problem we are facing, brings relief like medicine.

This 18th Annual BEN-Africa Conference attendee's concern was indeed like medicine for the whistleblower. The weight of truth was heavy but, seeing its impact, made it a burden she was willing to bear.

While there may have been adverse experiences, BEN-Africa has stood the test of time. To have done this has required a special kind of strength, as Yvonne Katambo chronicles.

12. The unyielding spirit of BEN-Africa: Resilience

Dr Yvonne Katambo, Chairperson: BEN-Africa Networking Council

Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. At BEN-Africa, we've discovered that it's also the ability to organise a flawless conference despite missing luggage, uncooperative Wi-Fi, and virtual presenters who freeze mid-sentence. For the past six years, the BEN-Africa Executive Committee team have embraced the art of resilience, proving that even in the most trying times, the show must go on – albeit with a few laughs along the way.

Each year, our journey begins, as it always does, with our annual conference planning. These gatherings are more than just a meeting of minds; they are a celebration of African culture, collaboration, and coordination. "A face-to-face meeting over a meal avails more than the law" (Kamba proverb). BEN-Africa conferences are marked by intricate planning and remarkable execution, a team of creative and innovative conference committee members with humility and a desire for excellence; they are a true reflection of the African spirit of resilience.

Then came 2020, the year that tested everyone's resilience in ways we had not anticipated. Covid-19, a pandemic, the uninvited mystery! And suddenly, our annual gathering transformed into a digital affair. Instead of bustling conference rooms, we found ourselves on screens, nodding along to presentations that occasionally sounded like they were being delivered from outer space. Resilience took on a new meaning as we navigated the joys and challenges of virtual meetings, muted microphones, frozen video feeds, and all the usual fiends that the virtual reality now faced. Despite these odds, BEN-Africa delivered a successful, well-attended virtual conference, and the team, once again, experienced a renewal of hope and courage to soldier on.

In 2021, we were determined to bring back the magic of in-person conferences. Swakopmund, Namibia, our next destination, despite the lingering shadow of Covid-19 restrictions, we set forth with a renewed sense of purpose. Armed with face masks, sanitisers, and confusion of ever-changing travel guidelines, we complied and arrived ready to conquer any obstacle, resilient as ever. Delegates from all over Africa joined us, some in person and some virtually, and together we made history by hosting a successful, well-coordinated hybrid event.

Throughout these experiences, the BEN-Africa team has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to excellence and adaptability. Our strength lies not only in our ability to overcome obstacles but in our capacity to do so with grace, good humour, and a willingness to adapt. Whether it's dealing with new travel protocols, navigating virtual platforms, or conducting events in countries we have never been to, our resilience continues to define us.

As we look to the future, we do so with confidence that no matter the challenges that lie ahead, BEN-Africa will continue to thrive, uplift, and inspire. After all, we've learned that resilience isn't just about enduring hardships; it's about thriving in spite of them and doing so with a smile.

BEN-Africa operates on a number of leadership levels to further its personal and organisational networks, with leadership resting in the executive committee and strategic direction provided by the networking council and advisory board. Over the 25 years, a caring and dedicated culture has evolved at BEN-Africa. Joaquim Muando defines this culture as a quite unique organisational spirit.

13. The cool African spirit of the BEN-Africa team

Mr Joaquim Muando, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

One year, yes; another year, yes, to BEN-Africa's Conferences on the African continent. It convenes businesspeople who share a passionate vision of a better world through ethical discussions. Seeing this amalgamation of fellow Africans gathering to discuss good stuff cannot be better. Meeting and interacting with these men and women who do their best for a better business environment through networking is such an experience. Amazing!

Amazed walk and talk – the good words, the good thoughts, the good research, and the good actions, shared in a good mood, along the two full and intense days of gathering. What a feeling!

A feeling of belonging, a feeling of contributing, and a spirit of sharing. Sharing of volunteered responsibilities, sharing the passion, sharing the good actions. It's simply energising!

Energised by the cool spirit of African music and dance. The drums that characterise our music rhythm cannot go undetected. What a reunion of energy! Energised by African countries' attractions, its best African food and drinks. It ignites! Ignited by a good mood, good humour, and a good story to live … What a combination of great spirit and purpose!

It is this great spirit that drives the BEN-Africa team to do wonders for that awaited year-after-year reunion. A reunion not to be missed. A yearly event that is planned far in advance, one month after the other. It is a meticulous process extended to more volunteers in action that brings in great discussion points and a helping hand – that makes it an amazing conference organising committee. This is a cool African spirit of the BEN-Africa team!

And we are always looking for new members to join our family. So, come on, pop us an email, and join this exceptional team.

Developing an African theory of good environmental leadership: Integrating *ukama* into Metz's African theory of good leadership

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Abstract

The leadership model proposed by Metz, grounded in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, provides a framework for understanding the traits of African leadership as can be applied in business. This article proposes an extension of these ideas by utilising the African concept of *ukama* to offer a conceptualisation of what constitutes environmental leadership in African business contexts. The article begins by drawing on key authors to outline the concept of *ukama* and highlights the focus *ukama* imparts on the interdependence between humans and the natural world. It then looks at the implications of *ukama*'s principles in the realm of business leadership, illustrating how the qualities of *ukama*-infused leadership can be translated into managing ecological challenges. The article motivates the importance of such a perspective, noting the environmental threats Africa faces, the importance of incorporating Indigenous frameworks into proposed solutions, and storytelling as a practical means of embedding these values.

1. Introduction

With the threats of pressing environmental challenges looming large, can the African concepts of *ubuntu* and *ukama* be used to ground a conception of (business) leadership that incorporates environmentally conscientious behaviour? Alongside the growing urgency of engaging with the planet in more sustainable ways, there is also a growing question of how to develop conceptions of leadership, including within the context of business, which reflect local values. This article addresses these questions by exploring the integration of African environmental ethics, particularly the concept of *ukama*, into existing leadership theories centred on *ubuntu*.

In particular, I build on Metz's (2018) work, in which he articulates an ethic of leadership grounded in Afro-communal values, incorporating the principles of *ubuntu*. His analysis lays out the philosophical underpinnings of what an Afro-communal conception of leadership may entail, particularly emphasising *ubuntu*'s focus on community and interconnectedness. I extend Metz's conception of leadership to also incorporate the Indigenous African notion of *ukama* and thereby demonstrate that *ukama*, which emphasises interconnectedness not only among people but also between humans and the natural world, can significantly inform an African conception of leadership.

This article contributes to the literature by offering a novel application of *ukama* to an African conception of leadership. Though the concept developed here could be applied to leadership more broadly, the article looks at it in the context of business leadership specifically. The application to other spheres of leadership, and the limitations thereof, is reserved for work elsewhere. This article instead helps to lay the groundwork for how *ukama* and *ubuntu* can enhance the role of corporations and their leaders in addressing environmental challenges. While *ubuntu*, at its core, maintains that enacting one's full humanness requires engaging in communal relations with other people in ways characterised by care, respect, empathy, and harmony, *ukama* encompasses the idea of relatedness, emphasising the interconnectedness of all entities in the universe.

In synthesising the notions of *ubuntu* and *ukama* into an African conception of leadership, the article aims to contribute to academic discourse and provide actionable insights for current and future business leaders who are navigating the pressing environmental challenges of our time. To this end, Section 7 introduces a discussion on how these principles can be actualised through storytelling, a key aspect of African moral education, and suggests practical methods – such as workshops and community initiatives – that firms can employ to embed these ethical frameworks in leadership development.

The article's aim is to underscore the necessity of leadership that is deeply rooted in African ethical philosophies, promoting approaches that are sustainable, community-focused, and responsible. This constitutes a valuable goal given the continent's acute vulnerability to environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss and the ways in which these issues are deeply intertwined with social, economic, and cultural dimensions. I hope to illustrate the usefulness of adopting *ukama* in business leadership models to help address these environmental challenges effectively.

I do not claim to present a comprehensive conception of leadership that encompasses all dimensions of African ethics related to the natural environment. Instead, I aim to provide an initial overview by drawing on key authors in the field of African environmental ethics. This overview will nonetheless illustrate how certain elements can be appropriately applied to a leadership model that seriously considers the role of a business organisation within its larger human and non-human communities.

I also do not attempt to show that widening the ethical consideration incorporated into a conception of African leadership (to include the natural environment) is a more correct interpretation than a narrower one. I only hope to show that there are African foundations for making such an extension, and to show the implications of doing so.

This is similar to how Metz (2018:38) notes that while he employs one interpretation of sub-Saharan morality from among other plausible interpretations, he does not attempt to show that the version he adopts "is preferable to its rivals; it is advanced as merely one plausible philosophical interpretation of sub-Saharan mores".

In terms of the article's overarching structure, I follow a strategy akin to Metz's (2018) paper in which he provides his conception of African leadership that draws on *ubuntu*. Metz begins by outlining a framework for Afro-communal ethics. He then provides an abstract description of leadership guided by this ethic and goes on to explore how it could be practically implemented in specific areas, such as decision-making within a company and the identification of stakeholders.

I follow a similar approach in my attempt to incorporate *ukama* into the foundational principles of an African conception of leadership. I first introduce the concept of *ukama* and its relevance to the African environmental ethical position. I then explore how these ethical principles can be translated into a conception of leadership and apply them to the same concrete matters as Metz (2018), including: the purpose of a firm from the perspective of an African environmental leader, whom a firm should assist, how a firm should make decisions, and how a workplace should be organised.

The corresponding sections of this article include an introduction to Metz's work and the principles of *ubuntu* in leadership (sec. 2), a detailed examination of *ukama* and its application to African environmental ethics (sec. 3), and an analysis of how these ethical frameworks can be applied to a conception of leadership (sec. 4). I further offer a discussion on the implications of Afro-communal environmental leadership (sec. 5), the importance of developing and implementing African environmental leadership (sec. 6), and insight into how storytelling can serve as a practical mechanism for instilling these values (sec. 7). I then conclude (sec. 8).

2. Summary of Metz's work

In his paper "An African theory of good leadership", Metz (2018) delves into the fundamental African value of communion, aiming to articulate and ground a moral-philosophical theory of leadership rooted in the Indigenous African intellectual tradition. After outlining a leadership theory rooted in an Afro-communal ethic, he goes through a number of topics that business leaders tend to face, showing how this conception of leadership would deal with each topic.

Central to the Afro-communal ethic Metz draws on is the principle of communion, taken to be not just a means to an end but an end in itself. Metz (2018:38) introduces *ubuntu* as a foundational African value characterised by the maxims "I am because we are" and "A person is a person through other persons", which express an ethical stance emphasising the importance of communal relationships. While other ethical frameworks, including other interpretations of sub-Saharan morality, may view communal relationships as a means of promoting well-being or life-force, in the interpretation Metz (2018:38) adopts, "relationality is, roughly, an end in itself".

Metz (2018:39. Emphasis in original) notes that ethicists working in the African tradition commonly maintain, or suggest, "that the *only* comprehensive respect in which one can exhibit human excellence is by relating to others communally or harmoniously". Metz continues that as this communal ethic is essential for developing a person's humanness and personhood, it is set apart from those views that are individualistic in nature and which prioritise respect for autonomy.

By quoting a number of representative African theorists, Metz (2018) further sums up the aforementioned African idea that fostering communion plays a paramount role in enacting one's humanness, saying that there are two aspects that characterise what it means to commune. Firstly, one must consider oneself as part of the whole, bound up with others. Secondly, one must strive to enhance the good of the community and of others, promoting the prosperity of all. So, according to this view, enacting one's full humanness entails identifying with others through an attitude of care and solidarity and being committed to promoting their well-being.

As Metz (2018) points out, *ubuntu* highlights the intrinsic value of communal relationships and maintains that self-realisation and moral excellence are achieved through fostering harmonious community relations, which involves sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life. In other words, if one is to uphold the values of *ubuntu*, one ought to strive to develop one's humanness as fully as possible. This is done by prizing and fostering communal, harmonious relations with other people and enhancing their ability to do the same.

For Metz's (2018) purposes, when caring for others' quality of life, the 'other' is considered another person, who is, in turn, also capable of identity and solidarity. In other words,

> [O]ne ought to develop personhood, which means honouring people by virtue of their dignified ability to be party to communal relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life. (Metz, 2018:41)

Metz explains that this captures what is meant by the African maxim that "A person is a person through other persons". Failing to properly respect those who can commune is an ethical failing, detracting from one's attainment of human excellence.

This, however, leads to the question of who, in fact, should constitute the 'others' with whom one should commune:

> There is much more that could be said to spell out and motivate this Afro-communal ethic. For example, the question of which others to commune with could use more discussion. Do they include imperceptible persons such as ancestors, or perhaps some non-persons such as animals? These are important issues, but they do not need to be addressed here… (Metz, 2018:42)

I hope to pick up on some of these points by investigating how the conception of an African leader that Metz puts forward could be expanded to include conceptions of communing with the broader natural environment and its non-human constituents.

In particular, I suggest that the conception of community that Metz adopts has alternative interpretations supported by African ethical standpoints. Focusing on these other interpretations may lay the basis for an African business leader prioritises communing with other people, and with the natural environment. I explain this further in the following section and will later highlight some benefits that may be afforded by adopting this way of leading. It may help in attempting to shift businesses in Africa (and elsewhere) towards adopting more sustainable practices and outlooks.

3. African environmental ethics and *ukama*

As shown in the previous section, Metz (2018) draws on certain elements of African moral thought to develop the Afro-communal ethic. I noted that there are also foundational assumptions and beliefs in African world views and ethical frameworks that could ground an ethic that considers non-human nature to be part of the community with whom humankind is entangled in morally relevant ways. I therefore suggest that these further concepts may ground what can be termed an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic. In particular, there is (a) an underlying relationality assumed within African world views which extends beyond humankind, and (b) this relationality has ethical implications.

Bringing these two together, an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic is rooted in an awareness of the intricate connections between humans and the natural environment, and fosters a moral obligation to cultivate and maintain these connections. In fact, "such interrelationality is what most scholars have observed as the feature that best sums up African ethics" (Murove, 2009a:26). To explain this in more detail, I will go through (a) and (b) in turn. I draw on various prominent authors in the field and offer an overview of the foundations and moral standpoint encapsulated by this ethical position.

3.1 Relationality as captured by *ukama*

Central to how an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic conceives of humankind's place in and responsibilities towards the world at large is the concept of *ukama* (relatedness/relationality), a term from the Shona language that captures the ontological interconnectedness and interdependence of all things – human, animal, and animate and inanimate nature. Chemhuru (2023:256) offers an interpretation of *ukama* based on its etymology "as a class 14 noun in the Shona language", similar to other nouns of the same class that refer "to aspects of reality or things that are infinite and quantity-neutral".[1] By doing so, Chemhuru (2023:258) notes that *ukama* refers to the state in which all components of the natural world exist, so it "can be taken to be omnipresent among all beings in the universe".

Based on this view, *ukama* is an intrinsic element of existence. It is deeply rooted in the assumption that all elements of the natural world are part of a single, unified community, so "the African relational philosophy of *ukama* forms an integral basis for communitarian existence" (Chemhuru, 2023:258). *Ukama* fundamentally asserts an ontological claim

1 Chemhuru's interpretation is in contrast to Murove (2004), who sees *ukama* as an adjective.

about the nature of being, emphasising that existence itself is inherently relational and that every entity is intrinsically connected to the entire cosmos. As Nche and Michael (2024:4) also note, "African ontology is rooted in the interconnectedness of beings within the cosmos, emphasising a holistic and harmonious perspective".

To make explicit *ukama*'s connection to *ubuntu*, *ukama* refers to the relatedness/relationality underlying reality that lays the ontological basis for flourishing as per *ubuntu*. It is our fundamental relatedness to the communities in which we find ourselves that provides the basis from which we can strive to cultivate and maintain harmonious relationships within these communities. As Le Grange (2012:338) explains, "*ubuntu* needs to be understood as microcosm of (or concrete expression of) a broader concept, *ukama*, which means relatedness – relatedness to the entire cosmos".

Since this relatedness is pervasive, a proper expression of one's humanness in the African view requires "an expression of interconnectedness between people and between people and the biophysical world" (Le Grange, 2012:333-334). This interconnectedness is foundational to African thought, emphasising that true human existence is intertwined with the entire environment. As such, when taken alongside *ubuntu*, these concepts entail that "human existence is only meaningful when seen as a continuum with all else that exists" (Murove, 2009b:324). Chemhuru (2023:254) also makes this point and suggests that *ukama* can be seen as "a relational notion that can be used to connect human beings with the entire environment, including non-human beings, that can also include past, present and future generations".

This all stands to illustrate that *ukama* is not just about human relationships but extends to a broader ecological context. As Le Grange (2012:334) explains, "the fundamental relatedness of beings encapsulated by *ukama* includes a sense of relatedness with other natural entities, not just persons". According to this African world view, as Murove (2009a:28) also notes, "relatedness is not restricted to human relations but extends to the natural environment, the past, the present and the future".

This means that *ukama* gives rise to a deep sense of connection with all aspects of nature. Le Grange (2012:335) reinforces this by stating that "*ukama* means relatedness to all natural entities". This broad understanding of relatedness underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements in the universe, positioning *ukama* as a central tenet in African ecological and ethical thought.

To further demonstrate the prominence of this idea in African thought, I refer to Nche and Michael's (2024:1) review of "a wide range of online and offline materials, including books, book chapters, and journal articles". By reviewing the work of over twenty authors in the field of African Indigenous Religion and environmental ethics, Nche and Michael (2024) illustrate that interconnectedness and our duties to nature are central tenets in African thought. Their review highlights that African ontology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are deeply rooted in the belief that all beings are interconnected and that human well-being is tied to the health of the natural environment. They note that this interconnectedness is reflected in various African cultural practices and beliefs, which

emphasise the importance of living in harmony with nature and recognising the moral status of non-human entities.

It is, however, worth pausing to note what is meant by 'harmony' in this context. A further feature of *ukama* that is relevant to highlight is its compatibility with diverse views of nature, including those that emphasise disharmony and disequilibrium. *Ukama*'s focus on relationality means that it does not necessarily take an ontological stance on whether nature is best viewed as harmonious or, as modern ecological science now suggests, in a state of constant flux, tension, and change. Instead, its ontological claim is that all entities exist in relationality, and the quality of those relationships shapes the ethical imperatives for action.

This flexibility allows *ukama* to align with the modern ecological understanding of natural systems as dynamic and adaptive. By accommodating the dynamism of nature, maintaining that all things exist in relation to each other and not necessarily in a state of fixed harmony, *ukama* can encourage responsibility and care within this ongoing flux. This fosters an approach that is adaptable to the complexities of ecological systems without being tied to static or idealised conceptions of harmony.

Ukama's emphasis on relationality situates it within a branch of environmental ethics that advocates for relational value as a distinct category of value. This perspective seeks to address the limitations of the traditional duality between intrinsic and instrumental values by offering an alternative to the conventional approach of valuing nature either intrinsically (for its own sake) or instrumentally (for the benefit of humans). As Chan et al. (2016:1462) observe, "a cornerstone of environmental policy is the debate over protecting nature for human's sake (instrumental value) or for nature's (intrinsic values)". However, they argue that this dichotomy fails to capture how people actually value the environment and often does not resonate with decision-makers.

To address these limitations, Chan et al. (2016:1462) propose a third class of values – relational values – describing them as values that "are not present in things but derivative of relationships and responsibilities to them". This framework emphasises that people's connections to nature may involve care, kinship, and expressions of personal or cultural identity. In their words (Chan et al., 2016:1463):

> According to these views, the value of the land is not independent of humans (i.e., not intrinsic). Moreover, it may be treacherously reductionist, if not offensive, to suggest that nature exists to provide (instrumental) utility to humans.

Relational value reframes the human-nature relationship as an end in itself rather than reducing it to intrinsic or instrumental value. This understanding closely mirrors the ethical approach of *ukama*, which centres on relationships and responsibilities as fundamental to how value is understood and enacted.

3.2 *Ukama*'s ethical implications

Though *ukama* is an ontological description of reality, spotlighting the interconnectedness and relatedness of all beings, it has ethical implications. This has been hinted at above, but in section 4, I will make explicit how this African concept is not purely descriptive but prescriptive too. *Ukama* underscores the idea that being ethical according to this line of African thought means recognising and respecting the interconnected nature of the world and upholding the moral imperatives that this gives rise to.

Murove (2009a:28) explains this by saying that "African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole". Chemhuru (2023:253) also notes that the foundational relationality captured by *ukama* has ethical implications, saying that "the ethics of *ukama* ('relatedness') forms an integral anchor of African philosophy and ethics". Likewise, Francis (2016:9) notes that "the main thrust of African environmental ethics is to understand the ontology of man within the context of an environment he shares with non-humans and reveal the relational order that (ought to) govern being-in-the-world".

Primarily, the world view of *ukama* fosters a sense of stewardship and moral responsibility towards nature, encapsulating a holistic approach to environmental ethics. It further challenges the dichotomy that separates humans from nature, instead promoting a vision where human actions have profound implications on the natural world, and vice versa. *Ukama*, therefore, implies that ethical behaviour extends beyond human society and that one's moral landscape should include all forms of existence.

This is captured nicely by Ifeakor and Otteh's (2017:183) term "obligatory anthropoholism", which integrates the ideas of "the holistic concept of being in Africa, whereby all existing things intercompenetrates each other" and how humans are consequently imbued with an "obligation to care for the whole of [the] ecosystem". This emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings, while also acknowledging humans as a privileged part of nature due to our unique capabilities. Such privilege comes with significant responsibility.

That humans occupy a privileged position within nature is a core element of African ontology. This idea may have slight variations in how it is specified, but the central idea that it fosters a sense of obligation to maintain harmony within the hierarchy – rather than giving humans dominion over or the right to exploit the rest of creation – is ubiquitous. This is noted by Nche and Michael (2024:5) who say, "different African cultures might have variations in their ontological hierarchies, but a common thread of interconnectedness and harmonious coexistence can be observed".

Similarly, Bujo (2009:290) notes that although African world views often include the belief that God provides animals, plants, and the inanimate environment for human use, this does not grant humans the right to "treat the lesser forms of being arbitrarily". While there is a recognised distinction between humans, animals, and plants, this difference does not confer a privilege to "subdue, dominate, and exploit the rest of creation" (Tangwa, 2006:390).

Ifeakor (2019:169) similarly clarifies that "humans are only one privileged part of the whole and this is because of her obligatory role to nature and the world as a result of her capabilities". Based on this view, humans are obligated to care for, tend, and conserve the environment, not for their own benefit, but for the holistic well-being of the entire ecosystem.

> In obligatory anthropoholism, obligation is not targeted at just human ends, for human benefit or for his economic enrichment, rather the African concept of holism; the interrelatedness, interconnectedness, intercompentration between both the seen and the unseen elements puts humans under obligation to tend, care and conserve the environment. (Ifeakor & Otteh, 2017:183)

This ethical perspective fosters an imperative that human actions should aim for the well-being of the entire environment, ensuring sustainability and harmony within the ecosystem as a whole.

When it comes to dilemmas – situations where moral objectives such as human well-being and environmental preservation may not align – *ukama* provides a framework for prioritisation. While *ukama* recognises a hierarchy of being that privileges human needs, this privilege is tempered by its commitment to relationality and interdependence. Unlike other anthropocentric views that may permit widespread exploitation of nature to satisfy excessive human wants, *ukama* emphasises restraint and responsibility. Preference is given to human well-being but within the bounds of necessity, ensuring that basic needs are met without unnecessarily compromising the health and integrity of the broader ecosystem.

This balance reflects *ukama*'s ethical commitment to respecting the environment as a relational partner rather than a resource to be dominated or exploited. For example, in scenarios where agricultural productivity, biodiversity conservation, and soil health cannot all be achieved simultaneously, *ukama* would encourage prioritising practices that meet essential human needs while minimising environmental harm. In this way, *ukama* fosters greater environmental respect and concern than anthropocentric models focused solely on human gain.

As has been shown, an ethic rooted in *ukama* would foster practices that aim to sustain the earth's resources and promote biodiversity, reflecting a profound respect for the natural order. These would be considered as essential duties that honour the spiritual and moral connections between people and their environment. *Ukama*, along with *ubuntu*, provides a framework for understanding our identities as fundamentally intertwined with the environment. These philosophies extend ethical behaviour beyond human society to encompass all forms of life and non-life, advocating for harmony and balance. They stress that humans should live as respectful stewards of nature, contrasting sharply with those views that advocate dominance over it.

In summary, *ukama* and the Afro-communal *environmental* ethic it underpins provides an ethical framework that prompts us to see ourselves as integral parts of the intricate web of existence, not apart from it, emphasising the interconnectedness and mutual

dependence of all life. It should be becoming clear that a conception of leadership rooted in *ukama* would consequently involve making decisions that consider long-term ecological impacts and prioritise collective well-being, including plants, animals, and ecosystems. This approach contrasts with the short-term exploitation of natural resources for individual gain, promoting sustainable practices that ensure environmental health for future generations. The rest of the article aims to properly develop such an account of environmental leadership.

4. From an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic to an account of leadership

As I have offered an initial discussion of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic in the previous section, I now move on to, firstly, developing an understanding of leadership that is rooted in this ethical position and secondly, in section 5 and similarly to how Metz (2018) framed his discussion, I will suggest how this account of leadership would be applied to "several concrete matters, such as how to make decisions in a firm and whom to treat as a stakeholder" (Metz, 2018:42).

In developing an account of leadership rooted in an Afro-communal ethic, recall that Metz (2018:42) identifies the belief that a person's identity and well-being are deeply entrenched in their relationships with others as core elements. This ethic gives rise to an instance of servant leadership, in which a leader is "one who does much to help others" (Metz, 2018:42). Accordingly, Metz continues by noting that a good leader helps others to succeed in their pursuit of communing properly with others, so that a good leader themselves and the people whom they lead can foster and nourish proper modes of communion. Such an outcome is pursued for its own sake on this view, such that "a good leader seeks out a certain way of relating for its own sake" (Metz, 2018:43).

To see what account of leadership an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic would give rise to, let us remember that this position maintains that the interconnectedness emphasised by *ubuntu* and *ukama* apply to the relationships between humans *and* the rest of the natural world. This would inform a holistic approach to leadership. Thus, leadership within the African context, rooted in an ontological understanding of *ukama*, is deeply committed to the ethos of interconnectedness and communal welfare for the human and non-human world. This involves recognising the value of relating properly with all components of the ecosphere and understanding the symbiotic relationships that sustain life and human excellence.

In practice, leaders who embrace *ukama* would prioritise policies and actions that promote ecological balance and sustainability. To offer an example, a leader influenced by *ukama* would advocate for land use practices that not only boost agricultural productivity but also conserve biodiversity and maintain soil health. This encompasses the essence of servant leadership that Metz also identified regarding leadership, such that the value of identity and solidarity derived from Afro-communalism suggests a model of leadership that is servant rather than master. In a similar vein, environmental leaders guided by

ukama act as stewards of the earth, serving the land and its people by safeguarding natural resources.

In doing so, leadership influenced by *ukama* offers new avenues for business ethics to integrate environmental considerations more robustly into corporate decision-making processes. *Ukama* requires leaders to make decisions that are economically and politically sound but also ethically justifiable. This means that environmental leaders must assess the long-term impacts of their decisions on the ecological and social fabric of their communities. Leaders adopting *ukama* would thus reject exploitative and unsustainable practices in favour of those that align with the principles of sustainable development.

Furthermore, in the face of climate change and other environmental threats, leaders guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama* need to foster resilience and adaptability within communities. This involves developing and implementing strategies that enhance the community's capacity to cope with environmental shocks and stresses. By leveraging traditional knowledge and combining it with modern scientific understanding, leaders can develop innovative solutions that are culturally appropriate and environmentally effective.

Lastly, leadership informed by an African commitment to communion (through *ubuntu* and *ukama*) would necessitate engaging communities and empowering them to take an active role in environmental conservation. Such an environmental leader ensures that environmental policies and initiatives are not imposed top-down but are developed through the active participation of the communities affected by such policies to inspire collective action towards environmental stewardship.

Metz (2018) also highlights the importance of consensus and inclusivity, noting that an ethical leader guided by *ubuntu* is one who fosters harmony and commonality, prioritising the communal good. Expanded to environmental concerns, leadership informed by *ukama* similarly emphasises the importance of community-driven initiatives, where decisions about resource management are made through inclusive dialogues that consider the welfare of all those involved, including the entire ecosystem.

In conclusion, leadership through *ukama* is about embodying the principles of interdependence, care, respect, and mutual responsibility for the natural world. It involves translating these values into actionable strategies that foster long-term sustainability and community well-being. By integrating the ethical insights of *ukama* with practical leadership actions, environmental leaders can help us move closer towards a harmonious and sustainable coexistence between humans and nature.

That said, while such an outcome would certainly be beneficial, we should remain cognisant of how *ukama*-leadership seeks to prioritise communing with the natural world as an inherently valuable mode of engagement. In other words, not (only) for the benefits it may afford. As Metz (2018:43) notes when drawing on *ubuntu*, "a good leader seeks out a certain way of relating for its own sake". So too should leading with consideration for what it means to be in proper relation with the human and broader non-human community be pursued for its own sake under *ukama*-inspired leadership.

After having outlined the key principles of the leadership theory that would be supported by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, I proceed to explore how this conception of leadership might be applied to the concrete issues that Metz (2018) examines. Overall, this allows Metz (2018:43) to ask and answer, "What would a firm or other large organisation look like if it were guided by the Afro-communal conception of good leadership?" Now, let us ask: what would it look like if it were guided by *ukama* as well?

5. Implications of Afro-communal *environmental* leadership

5.1 What is the point of a firm from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:43) notes that the point of a firm, if lead by Afro-communal ethics, would be to enable consumers "to live objectively better lives, particularly socio-moral ones", since such a firm would exhibit solidarity with consumers as its ultimate aim would be to prize communion. Similarly, for an African environmental leader guided by the implications of *ukama*, the point of a firm extends well beyond the traditional business metrics of profitability and growth alone. Influenced by the value of relatedness inherent in *ukama* with regards to the human and non-human world, the focus shifts to how a business can serve as a steward of community and environmental well-being.

In this context, the purpose of a firm is re-envisioned to include the promotion of environmental sustainability and the well-being of the community it operates within. The point of a firm is thus not merely to maximise shareholder wealth but an environmental leader would view the firm as a platform for implementing sustainable practices that protect and restore the natural environment, while also ensuring economic and social benefits for the community.

Doing so includes adopting production methods that minimise environmental impact, using resources sustainably, and actively engaging in ecological restoration. A business led by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic is expected to operate in a manner that is responsive to the needs of its community, including the broader ecosystem. Thus, a firm should become an active participant in local and broader environmental initiatives, fostering partnerships that enhance community and ecological resilience.

This perspective represents a departure from the traditional capitalist model, where profit and growth are often regarded as the primary objectives of a firm. Instead, it introduces a more relational understanding of business, where economic activities are embedded within ecological and social systems.[2]

In essence, for an African environmental leader influenced by *ukama*, the point of a firm is to harmonise business practices with ecological and community well-being.

2 The approach here involves looking at how to adapt existing business structures to align with *ukama*-informed ethics (in line with the goals of the present article), but it would also be worthwhile to explore in future work how alternative, more community-centred organisational forms might better serve environmental and social well-being than the conventional business models offered by capitalism.

This approach seeks to mitigate the environmental impacts of business activities and leverages corporate capabilities to advance environmental integrity. This vision redefines the firm not just as an economic entity, but as an integral part of the ecological and social fabric it exists within, responsible for nurturing the environment that sustains us all.

5.2 Whom should a firm aid from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:44) considers who should be a stakeholder for a firm led by Afro-communal ethics, where a stakeholder is someone that a firm has a moral obligation to aid. Extending beyond two moral reasons often offered in the Western tradition (helping those in desperate need of aid or those to whom aid has been promised), Metz (2018:44) continues by suggesting that from the perspective of African communal ethics, there also exists a moral duty to aid those "with whom it has shared a way of life in some respect, including its society".

From the perspective of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, the question of whom a firm should aid also expands significantly beyond traditional stakeholders like shareholders and employees. Rooted in the importance of communal engagement, a firm should prioritise the well-being of its whole community. A brief example to illustrate this way of thinking in African life is a system of labour found in many central African societies called *likilemba* (in Lingala and Swahili) that is founded on a group sense of cooperation (Peterson, 2004:170).

The system of *likilemba* is put in place to ensure the village as a whole survives, and in it "labour rotates from one individual's project (in this case usually garden cutting) to another's" (Peterson, 2004:170). Thus, it seems reasonable to deduce that, according to an African ethical system, a firm may be expected to act in ways that benefit the community as a whole.

More specifically, however, once a firm is guided by the principles implied by *ukama*, which emphasises interconnectedness and mutual dependency of all the world's entities, a firm is part of a larger community that includes human stakeholders, the natural environment, and non-human entities. This broadened perspective would require acknowledgement that the firm's long-term success is intricately linked to the well-being of the ecological systems and non-human communities it interacts with.

For an environmental leader, this translates into business practices that not only minimise harm to the environment but actively contribute to its sustainability. This includes adopting green technologies, reducing waste, managing natural resources responsibly, and engaging in activities that restore and enhance natural habitats. Moreover, the firm under such leadership actively collaborates with environmental organisations, local communities, and governmental bodies to address ecological issues. A firm led in this way would recognise that it has a responsibility to maintain and improve the environment for current and future generations.

In essence, the African environmental leader, inspired by *ukama*, sees the firm as a community member with a moral obligation to support and sustain not only its human constituents but also the local and global ecosystems. This approach fosters a deeper sense of corporate responsibility that integrates environmental stewardship into the core operational strategies of the firm, ensuring that all actions contribute positively to the broader community of life that the firm serves.

5.3 How should a firm make decisions from the perspective of an African environmental leader?

Metz (2018:46) suggests that for an African leader operating under the ethical guidance of *ubuntu*, decision-making in a firm requires a process deeply rooted in the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and collective buy-in, noting that "all in the firm should usually be expected to agree to the essentials before going forward" with a particular decision. Metz emphasises the communal element of this decision-making methodology, noting that decisions in a firm, when guided by *ubuntu*, must be made collectively, involving all those affected by them. This collective decision-making should not only aim at consensus but should also actively seek to reconcile differing needs and expectations in a manner that respects and upholds the community's values so that all members of a firm "genuinely *share* a way of life" (Metz, 2018:46. Emphasis in original).

This participatory approach would also be fundamental for an environmental leader guided by an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, who would be required to include their employees' and environmental interests. This would ensure that decision-making processes respect human and environmental considerations, emphasising the interdependence highlighted by *ukama*. Since the environment cannot be directly consulted in decision-making deliberations, the inclusion of environmental considerations might involve consultations with environmental experts and local community leaders, and engaging with global environmental standards as proxies for direct environmental engagement. This means decisions are not solely based on economic outcomes but consider long-term ecological impacts and aim to find a balance between development and conservation.

As such, decisions would need to be scrutinised for their potential impacts on ecological systems, and strategies that promote environmental health and resilience would be prioritised. This might involve choosing sustainable materials, investing in renewable energy, or adopting principles to minimise waste. In practice, this would also entail that an environmental leader ensures the decision-making process is transparent and accountable. Information about how decisions are made and their potential environmental impacts would be communicated openly to all stakeholders, allowing for informed discussions and feedback.

By adhering to the principles foundational to an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic, an African environmental leader ensures that the firm's decision-making processes strengthen its role as a responsible member of the local and global community, committed to fostering an environment where nature and humanity can thrive together.

This is strongly contrasted with the process of making choices and decisions on the basis of promoting individual self-interest:

> While the western philosophical ethical tradition has greatly emphasised individual autonomy in making choices and decisions, African ethics gives primacy to relationality as the main influence when doing so [...] the guiding question for decision making is how a particular decision will affect one's relations in the community of existence. (Murove, 2009a:29-30)

This approach underscores the importance of considering the interconnectedness of all beings, ensuring that decisions are made with a deep awareness of their impact on the broader web of life.

5.4 How should a workplace be organised?

In addressing how a workplace should be organised, Metz (2018:46) contrasts managerialism with the leadership principles promoted by Afro-communal ethics. He notes how managerialism, prevalent in Eastern and Western contexts, prioritises efficiency through standardised outputs and measurable criteria, often using financial incentives and punitive measures to steer employees. This approach is justified on grounds of societal benefit or worker consent, but is critiqued by the African standpoint for its potential to undermine social cohesion and empathy among workers. As Metz (2018:46) says, "managerialism is on the face of it 'anti-social'... [and] hardly fosters a sense of togetherness between these two groups of people", that being managers and employees.

Furthermore, Metz (2018:47) suggests that managerialism tends to view workers as commodity-like assets rather than individuals with intrinsic value, saying that "managerialism is unlikely to foster sympathy, and probably encourages managers to view workers as human resources, not so much as people whose interests matter for their own sake". Metz further suggests that this also results in a reduced spirit of camaraderie among workers due to enhanced competitive behaviour, thereby alienating workers from managers and each other.

Expanding on Metz's conclusion in this regard, an African environmental leader would likewise advocate for a paradigm shift in how *natural* resources are perceived and managed within organisational contexts. Just as employees should not be reduced to mere human resources, but valued as individuals with intrinsic worth when guided by *ubuntu*, the same should be applied to natural resources when one adopts the outlook engendered by *ukama*.

Natural resources should not be treated solely as economic assets or commodities. Instead, their inherent value and role within ecosystems should be recognised and respected. This perspective aligns with *ukama*, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all entities in the universe, including humans and nature, and consequently calls for a relational approach where the well-being of natural resources is intertwined with the well-being of communities and future generations.

This holistic view challenges the traditional notions of resource extraction and exploitation that prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability. African environmental leadership promotes sustainable practices that consider the long-term environmental, social, and economic impacts of resource use. It encourages business organisations to adopt strategies that conserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and promote ecological resilience.

6. The importance of developing and implementing African environmental leadership

Having reached the end of my discussion of an Afro-communal *environmental* ethic and the type of leadership it gives rise to, I would like to end by suggesting some reasons as to why developing such an account constitutes a valuable task and the benefits that may be afforded by adopting such a leadership style in practice. Overall, in the face of escalating environmental challenges such as climate change, habitat loss, and resource depletion, the necessity for better environmental leadership within business management has never been more critical. Despite the growing importance of this agenda, "environmental management practices as pursued in most corporations falls far short of requirements to attain any semblance of a sustainable planet" (Schuler et al., 2017:225). As such, we need to work on developing better frameworks and conceptions of leadership that can inform more sustainable business practices.

When doing so, there is good cause to develop accounts of leadership rooted in African world views and philosophies. As Murove (2009a:26) points out:

> African ethics is one of the world's ethical traditions with its own contribution to make towards a global ethic. A world that has become interconnected should express human connectedness and interconnectedness through learning and appreciating the ethic traditions of all its peoples.

We should make sure that we are giving sufficient consideration to theories and ethical frameworks stemming from traditionally African ways of thinking.

Furthermore, African environmental leaders, grounded in the ethos of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, would be uniquely positioned to understand and integrate local knowledge and cultural practices in their strategies, which are crucial for sustainable management and conservation efforts. This becomes even more compelling when we consider how African Indigenous ways of living in relation to nature often demonstrate success in practically fostering environmental sustainability.

For example, an empirical study conducted in Mali, Botswana, and Kenya found that local people are aware of the environmental indicators that can be successfully used "in evaluating the status of indigenous vegetation and changes in biodiversity at the landscape level" (Angassa et al., 2012:75). Local herders knew which landscapes were sensitive to grazing and organised their grazing accordingly, "herders do not continue to degrade their environment; they rather rotate their land use based on seasons" (Angassa et al., 2012:75).

Kaya and Koitsiwe (2016) also conducted a study exploring the IKS of the Batswana tribal grouping in the North-West province of South Africa. They found that the Batswana's Indigenous knowledge included early warning indicators of natural disasters. Through participatory interviews and focus groups with 180 community leaders, Kaya and Koitsiwe (2016:102) found that the Batswana people used the behaviours of certain trees, animals, birds, and insects to identify the onset of climatic events, and they would then implement precautionary measures accordingly. While colonialism disrupted many Indigenous practices (see Beinart, 2000), traditional African approaches to interacting with the environment are often found to achieve a high level of symbiosis with nature.

Responding as effectively as possible to environmental threats in Africa is crucial, given that the continent faces many environmental challenges that are further complicated by socio-economic issues such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and political challenges. When operated exploitatively, businesses and corporations can exacerbate these challenges. Ijumba and Kaya (2016:98) note how in recent times multinational companies, particularly those dealing in oil and in search of low production costs, "have acted as economic predators in the continent, exploiting national resources [...] and committing environmental degradation".

As a result, and given the power they have to influence society and persuade governments, African business leaders should be doing more to contribute towards protecting Africa's people and environments:

> It is the people of and the economies of Africa that are at stake and most vulnerable to the loss of livelihoods and future as a result of environmental degradation [...] the African private sector should take ownership of the issues, and demonstrate leadership in this arena, by moving environment up the African corporate responsibility agenda. (Hayes, 2006:99)

This remains true today, and so to help them in this regard, it would be valuable to present African business leaders with conceptions of leadership inspired by African ethics. Rooted in the notions of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, I believe the conception offered here represents a helpful contribution that can drive effective responses to Africa's environmental crises.

African environmental leadership would also be helpful in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as outlined by the UNDP (2015), particularly those related to clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), affordable and clean energy (Goal 7), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14), and life on land (Goal 15). Business leaders who embody African environmental ethics approach these goals holistically for their organisations and their surrounding communities, recognising the interconnectedness of these issues and the importance of tackling them.

African environmental leadership would accordingly prioritise empowering communities by engaging them in decision-making processes. This approach not only helps in building resilience against environmental impacts but also ensures that conservation efforts are maintained and advanced by the communities themselves. Their deep understanding of

local ecosystems will contribute to implementing adaptive management strategies that can respond dynamically to ecological feedbacks. This includes promoting Indigenous practices such as agroforestry, sustainable grazing, and community-based wildlife management.

Finally, African environmental leadership also stands ready to improve global environmental stewardship. As a continent rich in biodiversity and natural resources, Africa plays a crucial role in the global ecological balance. Leadership that is mindful of this global role ensures that development and conservation strategies contribute positively to global environmental health. Such ways of leading could also be utilised as guiding frameworks. After outlining the fundamental tenets of African environmental ethics, Kelbessa (2015:76) notes that when addressing the problem of climate change, "industrialized countries can learn from African ethics". So too could industrialised leaders learn from African leadership.

The importance of developing, fostering, and implementing African environmental leadership is evident across various dimensions, from local to global scales. Leaders who draw from African environmental ethics can play an important role in transforming environmental challenges into opportunities for sustainable development, ensuring that current and future generations can enjoy a healthy, prosperous, and sustainable environment. This is an important task for business leaders in particular. As Hayes (2006:103) notes, "good environmental stewardship and sustainable use of natural resources are intrinsic to addressing human needs and ensuring the future of the people, ecosystems and businesses of Africa".

7. Actualising *ubuntu* and *ukama* through storytelling: Practical pathways for corporate culture transformation

To integrate *ubuntu* and *ukama* into business leadership, it is crucial to examine how these ethical frameworks can be internalised and applied in practice. Such an inquiry should also address the practical realities of how values-based leadership is cultivated and why it often struggles to take root in contemporary firms. Here, I propose that storytelling – particularly as grounded in African moral traditions – can serve as a key medium through which *ubuntu* and *ukama* can be communicated, sustained, and instilled in business leaders and their firms.

7.1 Storytelling in African moral education

Storytelling has long been a cornerstone of African moral education, serving as a pedagogical tool for conveying ethical principles. African narratives – ranging from myths to folktales – embed moral lessons within a relational world view, reinforcing interconnectedness between humans, communities, and nature.

Taboos, for example, play a crucial role in regulating human behaviour towards nature, reflecting an eco-communal ethic. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, taboos prohibit the abuse of water sources, as ancestral spirits are believed to be their custodians

(Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010:126). Such narratives embed sustainability within cultural consciousness, ensuring that environmental ethics are passed down through generations.

Schellnack-Kelly (2017:19) also highlights the broader role of oral traditions in fostering ecological awareness in Africa, stating that "oral tradition is an effective method of making people aware of animals and plants while encouraging efforts to protect the continent's [Africa's] fauna and flora". This perspective underscores how African storytelling cultivates environmental stewardship, positioning conservation not as an external obligation but as an inherent moral duty.

McCallum (2005) similarly explores the role of storytelling in fostering ecological intelligence, arguing that myths and legends cultivate a deeper awareness of humanity's interconnectedness with nature. He asserts: "Myths have a profound psychological significance. We are shaped and guided by them" (McCallum, 2005:23). Engaging with myths and other forms of storytelling would enable individuals to rekindle their intrinsic relationship with nature, complementing scientific understanding with a more holistic and emotional connection.

7.2 Instilling *ubuntu* and *ukama* in business leaders

Storytelling provides a strategic avenue for embedding *ubuntu* and *ukama* in business leadership. By integrating African moral narratives into corporate training, organisations can foster ethical leadership that prioritises communal well-being and ecological sustainability. Practical approaches could include:

- **Storytelling workshops**: Interactive sessions where leaders engage with narratives illustrating *ubuntu* and *ukama*, applying them to ethical decision-making.
- **Keynote presentations**: Scholars, storytellers, and community leaders share insights on relational ethics and sustainability through modes of storytelling.
- **Leadership reflection circles**: Inspired by African communal traditions, these forums facilitate discussions on ethical responsibilities to people and nature and could feature storytelling as a key mode of communication.

These initiatives could help leaders navigate the tension between profit-driven imperatives and ethical responsibilities, positioning sustainability as an intrinsic value rather than a regulatory obligation. By grounding leadership development in storytelling, business leaders can shift from being mere corporate agents to stewards of interconnected communities, human and ecological.

7.3 Storytelling as a bridge to sustainability

While storytelling fosters ethical awareness, structural barriers within firms – such as shareholder expectations and short-term financial pressures – can limit leaders' ability to fully enact these principles. To overcome these challenges, leaders must strategically advocate for *ubuntu* and *ukama* at multiple levels. At the board level, they can reframe corporate purpose to balance financial performance with social and environmental well-being. With investors, they can highlight how relational ethics contribute to sustainable

value creation, using case studies and market data to demonstrate long-term benefits. With regulators, they can align *ubuntu* and *ukama* with broader policy priorities, advocating for ethical frameworks that support sustainability and equity.

Beyond storytelling, these values can also be reinforced through further practical mechanisms. Le Grange (2012) suggests that when trying to promote the values underpinned by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, "moral education should involve the *enactment* of moral responsibility – getting students involved in actions for (in the interest of) human and non-human communities" (Le Grange, 2012:336. Emphasis in the original). Business leaders can build on this suggestion by implementing hands-on sustainability initiatives within their organisation, such as ecological restoration projects, ethical sourcing policies, and corporate social responsibility programmes that prioritise environmental and communal well-being.

By leveraging storytelling and practical engagement, business leaders can help embed *ubuntu* and *ukama* within their firms, ensuring ethical responsibility is not merely theoretical but actively realised in business practice.

8. Conclusion

This article has explored the intersection of African philosophical concepts, particularly *ubuntu* and *ukama*, with contemporary environmental leadership and business ethics. By synthesising these Indigenous ethical frameworks with frameworks for business leadership, the article offers valuable insights into the potential for fostering environmentally conscientious behaviour within business leaders and firms.

Throughout the discussion, it has hopefully become evident that *ubuntu* and *ukama* provide a robust foundation for reimagining corporate ethics within the context of environmental sustainability. *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on communal relations, empathy, and harmony aligns closely with the principles of environmental stewardship and responsibility. Similarly, *ukama*'s recognition of the interconnectedness of all entities underscores the imperative for holistic approaches to environmental management that consider the well-being of humans and nature.

By expanding Metz's (2018) conception of leadership as grounded in African moral thought to further incorporate African environmental values, this article has introduced a novel perspective on leadership – one that recognises the intrinsic link between ethical behaviour and environmental stewardship as captured by traditional African ways of thinking. It underscores the importance of integrating environmental considerations into corporate decision-making processes, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental aspect of ethical leadership.

Furthermore, the necessity of African environmental leadership has been highlighted, particularly in the face of escalating environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion on the continent. African leaders, guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, are uniquely positioned to address these challenges through

community engagement, innovation, and adaptive management strategies that draw upon Indigenous ontologies, cultural practices, and ethical standpoints.

The article finally suggested practical steps for implementing these principles in business leadership. I suggested storytelling as one method for instilling the values of *ubuntu* and *ukama*. By employing workshops, leadership training, and community-based initiatives that draw on storytelling as a mode of moral education, leaders can internalise and act upon the relational ethics at the heart of *ubuntu* and *ukama*.

In conclusion, African environmental leadership, guided by *ubuntu* and *ukama*, offers a holistic and culturally relevant approach to addressing the pressing environmental challenges of our time. By embracing these principles, businesses can fulfil their ethical responsibilities and drive positive change towards a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

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"*I have to scream and yell*": A Black man's, a Black woman's and a White man's reflections on gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions in a workplace

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Abstract

Sustainability is essentially the pursuit of intra- and intergenerational justice. Following from this, we contend that any form of discrimination in any context, including those arising out of gender, race, and the intersection between them, constitutes a sustainability problem. Here, we relate a journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' which we undertook based on the daily lived experiences of gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions[1] of Black women working in the telecoms sector in South Africa. Our act of telling this story in the space of appearance opened up by this special issue is an inherently political act, making this article an example of Freirean conscientisation. Our hope is that we contribute towards rendering the forms of aggression related to us slightly more visible to anyone who reads this article, on the assumption that visible oppression is less easy to stomach.

1. Introduction

We did not begin this study knowing that we would 'discover' and/or 'confirm' what we did. Does anybody ever really? Actually, if we knew what we were about to 'discover', would it even be a 'discovery' at all? But perhaps we are jumping ahead of ourselves with all this talk about 'discovery' and 'confirmation'. Perhaps we should first establish who we are? All of us were, after all, born in Africa. And we all live in Africa. And in the corner of Africa where we live, when a person stands up to 'speak' in public, it is convention that they tell you who they are and 'where' they come from. This helps those listening

1 We use the convention of putting the 'micro' in 'micro'-aggression in inverted commas to emphasise the irony embedded in this idea. There is really nothing small about these persistent aggressions.

to 'place' the speaker, and perhaps even to ground inevitable assumptions about them on a firmer foundation than just the way they look.

So, sticking with the conventions of our home, there were three of us who embarked on this journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation'. We were brought together around a dissertation-based master's research project. The first of us, KM, was 'The Student'. Because it is important to the story we are telling, KM identifies as a Black man. At the time of this study, he worked in the telecoms industry for a major cellular telephone company in South Africa. He first registered for his Master of Commerce in Business Management degree in January 2022, and he completed the qualification in early 2024 (Mhlakaza, 2024). The second of us, NN, was 'The Supervisor'. Again, because it is important to the story we are telling, NN identifies as a Black woman. She is a sociologist by training, and at the time this study was undertaken, she was a lecturer working to establish an academic career. KM was her first post-graduate student. The third of us, NE, was 'The Co-Supervisor'. He identifies as a White man. Although by training an ecologist, his research interests now lie broadly in the field of business ethics, which he generally approaches from something of a Marxist or neo-Marxist critical perspective. At the time of this study, he was a professor and was invited to participate because he had done this supervision thing many times before.

In KM's first tentative approach to NN and NE as prospective supervisors, he outlined what he wanted to study. He had noticed that in the company he worked for, and in the industry in which he worked generally, Black women seemed to be underrepresented and voiceless. This was especially in technical divisions and in management and leadership positions. Armed with this observation, as he put it in his original concept note:

> I want to explore this topic [the underrepresentation of Black women in the telecoms sector] to raise awareness of this matter and hopefully help pave a way for future women professionals to be interested in the sector. [KM]

The slightly naive optimism of grand praxis, which so often finds expression in master's level draft proposals, was quite strongly evident here, and again in the following, where KM reflected on what he viewed as the likely importance of the study:

> The importance of the study is to ensure that the future young Black women can enter the STEM2 sector in South Africa and become leaders without being discouraged by challenges faced by Black women leaders, and as such ensuring that a way is paved for these Black women to be top leaders in the future. [KM]

As supervisors, NN and NE were of course somewhat more 'realistic' (some might even say jaded) and moved to manage expectations a little. As NE put it in feedback:

> I think that you need to be a little more realistic in terms of your expectations of what your study will yield. Realistically, it is highly unlikely that it will 'ensure' anything because in all honesty, very few people will read a master's dissertation. Instead, you might say that: 'Any insights into the challenges experienced by women of colour

2 Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

> in the STEM sector can potentially assist us in …' This is much more modest in its expectation. [NE]

NN and NE were also concerned initially about a certain measure of paternalism embedded in KM's early articulations of his objectives. NN put it like this in feedback on one of his draft proposals:

> In terms of your framing of the benefits of your study, there are still traces of a hero complex – as though you are going to rescue Black women from their plight of oppression and discrimination – which must be removed. If this gets through to the wrong examiner, you are not going to pass because this will irritate them immensely. [NN]

NE was arguably even more concerned. Ever since reading Freire's discussion of "false generosity" (Freire, 1996:26), NE has been (and continues to be) plagued by the difficulties inherent in "speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991:5) given his almost universal oppressor identity. As such, not only was he concerned about the "hero complex" which NN alluded to, but on a more fundamental level, he was concerned about the appropriateness of a man undertaking this study full stop, not to mention a White man co-supervising it. At one point, he wrote:

> In places you seem to suggest that you are going to solve Black women's problems for them. This is likely to get you into serious trouble with any examiner who comes from a feminist background. I tried to illustrate the problem with this in my detailed comments by using an example from outside the gender domain – by making reference to Biko and his disdain for white liberals who moved to 'own' the liberation of Black people. This kind of 'oppressor saviour' is never appreciated in my experience. I think that this was why I was originally worried about a male tackling this particular study back when we were first discussing it. [NE]

Eventually, after much grappling with these issues, KM settled on the following questions that would guide his study:

1. How do intersectional factors of gender and race influence the experiences and career trajectories of Black Women in leadership positions within the telecoms sector in South Africa?
2. What specific challenges have Black Women faced in their efforts to attain leadership positions in the telecoms sector in South Africa?
3. What ongoing challenges do Black Women encounter even after achieving leadership positions in the telecoms sector in South Africa?
4. How do gender and racial identities intersect to shape the professional experiences and career progression of women in leadership roles within the telecoms sector in South Africa?

At the time, we were all comfortable that these were appropriately humble, premised on listening rather than saving, and open to the possibility of authentic discovery in the particular context within which KM had elected to conduct his study.

However, what we present in this article is not the findings from KM's study. It is a story of conscientisation in the true Freirean sense. Freire (1996:17) defined *conscientização* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality". There are two elements to this: consciousness of contradiction, and action. The story that we tell here is a very specific journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' of contradiction and oppression that emerged after KM had completed his data gathering and analysis. This was the consciousness element of conscientisation. In undertaking the inherently political act of telling our story in the space of appearance (Arendt, 1998) opened up in this special issue, we add action to the mix.

The story unfolds as follows. First, we present a basic description of the methods used in KM's original data gathering and analysis. We then describe the 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' of the contradiction that seeded this story, the original moment of consciousness. Following this, we elaborate on the contradiction to tease out the nuances and, ultimately, present something of a conceptualisation. Finally, we adopt a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 1996) and go to the literature to situate our story in a broader realm. Then we conclude.

2. The original study methods

Having established the very open guiding questions and having secured all the necessary approvals from research committees and research ethics committees, KM embarked on the empirical part of the study. He conducted a series of seven conversations with a sample of Black women in leadership positions in the company in which he worked (Table 1). Because all the participants were from a single company, i.e. a "bounded system" (Creswell, 2013:97), it might be technically appropriate to label this study a 'case study'. Complex jargon is often used to describe the processes used to assemble a sample and, in this way, lend an air of mystic authority to them. But in this case, it was really not that complicated. KM had conversations with Black women in leadership positions whom he knew. From there, participants he had interviewed put him in touch with other potential participants in their networks.

Table 1: Participant information

Number	Job title	Division	Age	Duration in position	Academic background	Interview length
P1	Executive Head of Division (EHOD)	Network Operations*	43	21 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	50 mins
P2	EHOD	Transmission	34	9 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	60 mins
P3	Managing Executive (ME)	Network Operations	44	3 years	• B Eng or equivalent • MA ICT • MBA	67 mins

Number	Job title	Division	Age	Duration in position	Academic background	Interview length
P4	EHOD	Network Project Management	41	20 months	• B Eng or equivalent • Postgraduate Degree – Management	59 mins
P5	EHOD	Network Operations*	39	3 months	• B Eng or equivalent • Master of Business Leadership	61 mins
P6	EHOD	Network Operations*	40	4 months	• B Eng or equivalent • M Eng • MSc • MBA	62 mins
P7	EHOD	Network Optimisation	39	5 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	62 mins
* Participants P1, P5, and P6 are all EHODs in the Network Operations division, but work in different regions.						

In terms of analyses, KM initially conducted them independently. He started his analyses during the interview process by noting preliminary 'thoughts' that struck him during each interview in a reflexive learning journal. He used these a) to adjust subsequent interview questions; b) to determine when he seemed to be nearing saturation; and c) as an input into his formal thematic analysis. Once he had completed the seven interviews and transcribed them, he then conducted a formal thematic analysis following the approach suggested by Nowell et al. (2017). This proceeded from the generation of initial particular codes, through an iterative process of aggregation and abstraction, to a set of themes. In August 2023, KM presented these together with supporting transcript excerpts to NN and NE so that a supervisor review process could get underway.

3. Contradiction

What would usually follow at this point in an article is a presentation of the full findings from KM's thematic analysis, sketching the rich landscape of 'challenges' that the participants in this study reported experiencing and the strategies they used to overcome them. However, as we have already noted, that is not the article that we have set out to write. This is a story of conscientisation that began to emerge during the course of the supervisor review process. Initially, this process proceeded fairly 'normally' for a master's dissertation through a series of iterations until October 2023. It was towards the end of October that the following pair of apparently contradictory excerpts from the interview with P6 intruded the consciousness of NE:

> I have to scream and yell, and I see a lot of unfortunately, Black female leaders adopt that persona because there's also a culture that supports that. There's a culture that celebrates that, there's a culture that says if you come across as that, then actually you belong. Unfortunately, I don't necessarily subscribe to that of which it has its disadvantages. Because people are so accustomed to that, when you do not show up like that, they undermine you. And they undermine your authority in that position and

> question. And they respond very quickly when you adopt that personality, which is very wrong for me. [P6]
>
> Unfortunately, when you as a Black female are firm and you are assertive, you get given a label. And that label is 'one of those'. It has come down from year to year. It's a label. Whether you fit it or not. But the minute you are not saying what the majority of your male counterparts are in agreement with, or, if it doesn't fit the way that it's supposed to … if you're not smiling and stroking the egos, then you are like … you are very angry; That one likes to shout. That one has issues. [P6]

Part of the reason why this contradiction intruded into NE's consciousness so forcefully was the fact that he had, for some time, been witnessing similar patterns of contradiction unfolding in a separate context, a university governance structure on which he was serving at the time. In an email to NN, he wrote:

> I am fascinated by the Catch 22 situation that can be drawn out [of KM's findings] where Black Women in leadership have to be extra assertive to overcome the stereotypes and discrimination, but that this assertiveness can backfire, resulting in these Black Women being accused of being tyrants. I have seen this happening elsewhere! [NE to NN, 26 October 2023]

He also mentioned this epiphany to a friend who laughed kindly at his ignorance and suggested that he read up on the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype. Which he did very quickly and therefore superficially. To be precise, he read the reflection of Motro et al. (2022) on the effects of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype on Black women in corporate leadership, which seemed particularly relevant to this study. The next morning, he again wrote to NN:

> On [KM's] Masters, I did some scratching around regarding the bit of his data that really struck me and stumbled onto the 'Angry Black Woman' stereotype/phenomenon in the literature. We might want to point him in the direction of that when he looks at his interpretation. It seems to me to be a very interesting literature… [NE to NN, 27 October 2023]

Not surprisingly, NN was not nearly as surprised by this 'discovery' as NE. To her, the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype was just another part of her daily lived experience as a Black woman. She responded:

> The stereotype around the Angry Black Woman makes an interesting read, which one experiences and gets to see every day. [NN to NE, 30 October 2023]

From NN's response and the literature that NE had superficially dipped into and shared, it was already quite clear that the contradiction inherent in the two excerpts that had triggered NE was not a new discovery for humankind! On the contrary, it seemed that KM's findings represented just another space in which the phenomenon of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype might manifest, and a personal 'discovery' of this phenomenon for NE and KM, and a 'confirmation' of it for NN. Nonetheless, we all agreed that it did warrant a focused return to KM's transcripts.

3.1 "I have to scream and yell"

We began a focused analytic process of 'pulling at this string' of anger in KM's transcripts. KM and NE, in particular, were initially very surprised that we found reasonably compelling evidence from all seven interviews, indicating that the phenomenon of having to "scream and yell" seemed to be universally at play among KM's sample. NN, of course, was somewhat less surprised. P1 stated that:

> The screaming and the tough talk, as much as it's needed in certain situations, but it's not that effective. Honestly, that's why I have to learn the hard way as well that I need to reduce it because it means I'm treating people as children. [P1]

As in the pair of excerpts from P6, the Catch-22 inherent in being 'angry' is apparent here, too. The "screaming" is "needed" but not "effective". P2 euphemistically referred to her giving expression to the contextually imposed need to be angry as having to "push harder" in the presence of "whiteness" (Green et al., 2007):

> But I did find that I had to push harder to be heard and understood when I was leading the team of White people, right? [P2]

P4 reflected the need to not be "soft" and a certain degree of personal dissonance that this has created:

> Sometimes if you become too soft they will like ohh OK, this one you know. So, you need to have that balance. I'm completely opposite of myself five years ago, completely OK. One of the team members said something in the last two months. He said: 'I'm a friend'. This is a Specialist, by the way. He says; '[P4] can be a friend. Actually [P4] is my friend, but I know … she's a friend that can fire you.' I acted as if I did not hear what he said. [P4]

The inference that the participant could swing from being a friend into a rage, which could result in people (friends) being fired, creates an impression of extreme mood swings and a degree of perceived unreasonableness.

P5 made perhaps the most ambiguous references to being angry out of the sample, references which might not have been picked up had we not specifically looked for them. There were two instances where she referred to women needing to "act like men" and doing so:

> What also I've realized is, the lack of appreciation of the characteristics of a female that tends to be missed, especially for a female that's not trying to act like a man. [P5]

> Because of this industry being the way it has been, I have seen how some women, when they become people's managers, they try to act like a man in a way. [P5]

These references were not explicitly relating her intersectional experience as a Black woman but rather emphasised her being a woman, although the question posed specifically asked about her experiences as a Black woman. Finally, P7 also spoke about

'angry' workplace stereotypes associated with Black women managers, which she was not naturally comfortable with:

> There is always this perception of a Black female manager who's now emotional and dramatic and always shouting at the team. And you know, 'There's certain times when you can't speak to them' [Black female managers]. [P7]

However, she also described how, over time, she had found her voice to confront male colleagues, in particular when inappropriate things were being said, even at the risk of being labelled as "emotional and dramatic" and causing "issues":

> And there's also that element of, I don't want to be now this drama queen and cause issues. So, you tend to just sweep under the rug. Where Umm later, I did, as I grew in my career and my confidence I was able to say, you know what, guys? That's not actually something you should be saying in the workplace, you know? [P7]

In summary, *all* of the participants made reference in their interviews to either being labelled as "Angry Black Women" or seeing people bearing the label of "Angry Black Women" in their work experiences. Several referred to the contextually imposed need for expressing anger either because a) it was expected in the workplace [P6], b) it was necessary to assert authority in the workplace [P1, P6], or c) it was provoked in the workplace [P7]. Several participants [P1, P4, and P6] reflected on feelings of personal unease (dissonance) that bowing to this necessity precipitated. They did not want to be an "Angry Black Woman". Finally, it was apparent that, while it was 'necessary' to "scream and yell", there was a strong sense that these 'necessary' expressions of anger were not particularly effective [P1 and P6] and, more specifically, that colleagues (generally white and/or male) did not appreciate them coming from Black women. Indeed, there was even an undercurrent that a Black woman might expect a hostile backlash arising from these necessary expressions of anger [P6 especially].

3.2 Aggression against Black women

This suggestion of aggressive backlashes against Black women from colleagues led us to the next string that screamed out for us to pull in KM's transcripts: aggression *against* Black women. And we did just that. We did not limit this search to instances of aggression which were described as backlash against the anger that Black women apparently needed to express. This return to KM's data, together with what we had already extracted in support of "*I have to scream and yell*" led us to identify three broad types of aggression against Black women: a) outright disrespect, b) sabotage, and c) blaming the victim.

In terms of outright disrespect, several of the participants reported being treated with disrespect. For example, P4 noted that:

> … the engineering sector has always been white dominated. White dominated, male dominated so it was a taboo thing for a female, especially Black female, you know to be seen as a leader, … So there's still a lot of sexism. There's still a lot of mistreatment.

> There's still a lot of *disrespect*, Uhm for Black females within the leadership roles. [P4] [emphasis added]

The most overtly offensive example of the type of disrespect that might be dished out to Black women managers was described by P2:

> And then you find the people who resist and I'm finding that the resistance is coming more from the people who've been in the business longer … and maybe you were not their choice of appointment … or who are these Black people [they ask], you know. I've had someone even say that 'They're planting all these "black girls" in these executive positions like crazy'. Yeah, it was like, uh, he said that to my face! And said: 'All of you are popping up everywhere.' [P2]

While, for the most part, the aggressions described by participants were more 'subtle', the sort of aggressions that one could easily imagine being swept under the rug, this particular one was, at least in our minds, different. Certainly, KM and NE instinctively struggled to see how anyone might mount a defence of such behaviour if the victim were to complain formally. That being said, NN reminded us that this sort of aggression happens daily and the worst that an aggressor can usually expect in the way of response is a polite reminder that this is inappropriate.

P4 related a similar sort of aggression arising out of affirmative action policies and the consequence of this:

> Because you know our company is pushing for female representation, they've got a target that they need to meet. People are of the perception that you are purely appointed … just from that statistics point of view and that you've got nothing else to offer than just being a Black female in a position. And therefore, people still want to make decisions for you, and they want to treat you like a puppet. [P4]

P2 described an aggression something akin to Ellison's "*Invisible* [wo]*man*" (Ellison, 2014):

> The older men … They first want to know who you are before you can have a conversation with them, and I'm like, look, I'm not going to keep explaining to you that I have been an EHOD for months and you are still not aware that I'm here. [P2]

While clearly an act of aggression, this aggression of not seeing people across gender and especially race lines can almost always be dismissed in an aggressor-dominated world with an "Oh, I just didn't see you. You have changed your hair?"

By far the most common form of disrespect that we unearthed was an aggression that we labelled 'skipping'. Here, participants described how colleagues (generally white and/or male) would simply circumvent them in the run of business. P1 reported how this took place from below, with people reporting to her directly accessing people whom she reported to:

> Your leader is white. So you find that now it's like, [someone white] reports to you. However, it's a mini kind of dotted line still for them to your leader because you know during lunch they walk together, they smoke together … When I was a manager, already

> I encountered that, whites, kind of, you know, feeling that because our executive is white, they feel privileged to have access to the top guy, you know. So obviously you'll hear them knowing more or they're busy working on certain things that you don't know of that they got from the top. [P3]

P1 reported how skipping took place from above, with managers directly accessing people reporting to her:

> So as a manager you will be like oh, it's done by the, you know, the staff. Then they [your managers] won't call you anymore for anything. They will call your team members. … You are a leader, but you are now in a competition with your staff at the bottom, just because they are white. [P1]

Other participants reported skipping more generally as emerging out of the "boys club". As P4 put it:

> There's this notion of a boys club right, and you still find that a lot within our environment and the boys club would be based on, you know, certain males you know, there's after hour meetings, there's side discussions and you as a woman are excluded.

Or as P5 put it:

> Sometimes where you find that there are 'boys clubs'. It's an industry that has been male dominated. You have a group, you know, guys that are friends or acquaintances that they meet outside even of the workplace where they go for drinks and what have you. And sometimes you know, roles that become available, are even discussed then so you can imagine if you're not part of the circle, that could potentially be a disadvantage, right? [P5]

Of course, one can just imagine the 'perfectly reasonable' and often incriminating (of the victim) explanations that would be advanced for skipping if the Black woman who was skipped raised it as an issue:

> From below: 'Oh, we couldn't get hold of you, and we needed a decision urgently.'
>
> From above: 'Oh, we couldn't get hold of you, and we needed information about your unit urgently.'
>
> From the boy's club: 'Oh, don't be silly. There's no boys club. Graham and I have been friends since university. Aren't you friends with Thandi? Does this mean there is a girls club?'

The second type of aggression that we identified was sabotage. Now, it is quite clear that there is a fine line between skipping, which we identified as a form of outright disrespect, and sabotage. Or at least it is clear that skipping might offer a mechanism through which sabotage could be executed. Nonetheless, several participants made specific references to sabotage and synonyms. For example, P4 noted that:

> In our environment there is this habit of people holding back information … you know, yeah so more like a *sabotage* type of strategy. We want to see her fail, let's see where she ends. [P4] [emphasis added]

"Backstabbing" was introduced as a synonym:

> They've never been led by a Black female, and so there was a lot of tension. And there was a lot of backstabbing, to be quite honest. [P4]

P1 added further nuance to the character of this aggression:

> Initially when I started, resistance … the support was just not there in the beginning … It's really *passive aggressive*. They will not do it directly that you will see it that it's happening. But you will see on the performance, but not to the extreme, that it will impact their performance, but your performance. I don't know if you understand what I'm trying to say. It's a bit of some *sabotage* that happens. But that you can't really directly link it to an individual … you *can't really pinpoint it nicely*. There's that *undertone* thing that is there. Yeah, you know… [P1] [emphasis added]

So, while some (in our case, KM and NE) might intuitively imagine that acts of "sabotage" and "backstabbing" would fall into an easily prosecuted category of aggression, P1 debunked this intuition. She described the subtle, "passive aggressive" character of this "sabotage" as difficult to "pinpoint".

The third and final type of aggression that we identified was blaming the victim. While the first two types do not necessarily link to the apparently necessary anger that Black women managers are required to express, in the case of this aggression, the intimate interaction is obvious. To be precise, it is obvious because it really requires no new excerpts beyond the ones already presented under "I have to scream and yell" to illustrate it. In many of those excerpts, it was clear that, in spite of the fact that it is systemically 'necessary' for Black women to "scream and yell", colleagues (generally white and/or male) seemed very quick to attribute the origin of the anger to the individual Black woman and not to systemic drivers. The default 'common sense' among colleagues seemed to have been that it was the Black woman who "has issues" [P6] or is "emotional" [P4, P7] or is a "drama queen" [P7] or "likes to shout" [P6]. But for completeness' sake, we do offer the following new excerpt from P4 for emphasis:

> As a Black Woman, you know, when you try to push back, you know, try to be assertive, you are seen as being *emotional*. Umm, so you are expected to, you know, take things in, not challenging the status quo, not challenging decisions that are being taken. And when you do, then yeah, the whole *emotional pettiness* that Black Women are associated with always comes up. [P4] [emphasis added]

This, then, was the aggression of blaming the victim, effectively an activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype.

4. Conceptualisation

The apparent intimate interaction between the necessary expression of anger by Black women and the reactionary aggression against them from the system[3] then prompted us to think a little more systematically about interactions. This took us to the whiteboard, where we started to draw blocks and arrows and eventually settled on something of a conceptualisation (Figure 1). It was in this process that NE's background in natural sciences yielded a somewhat unexpected explanatory dividend in the form of positive feedback loops (for example, see Meadows et al., 1972). These are used to describe situations where one phenomenon positively provokes another, which in turn positively provokes the former, leading to inevitable escalations of both phenomena. Because of these escalations, positive feedback loops are known for their destructive consequences in systems. Hence, they are sometimes called vicious loops (Meadows et al., 1972). We were able to identify four such positive feedback loops suggested either directly or with a little bit of imagination, labelled 1, 1a, 2, and 2a in Figure 1.

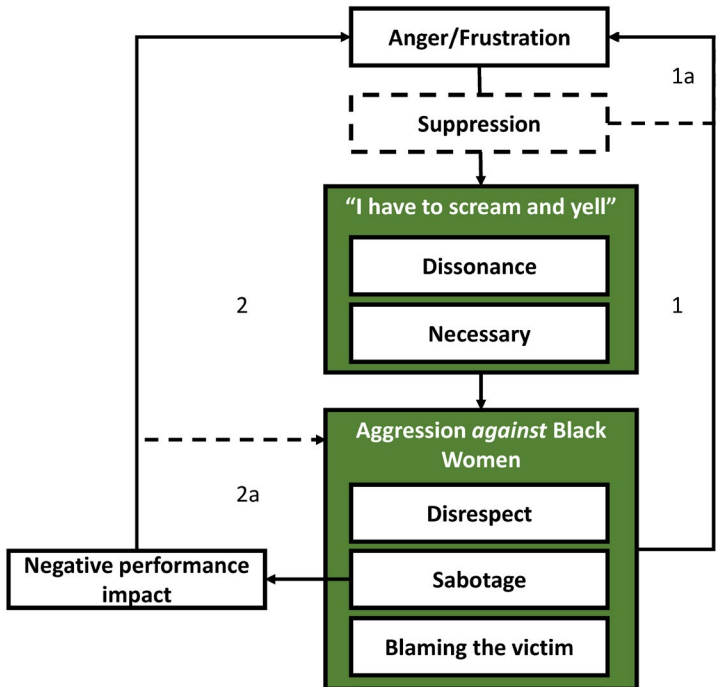

Figure 1: Conceptual model of four positive feedback loops between systemic aggression and anger experienced by and expressed by Black women in the workplace.

The first positive feedback loop (labelled 1 in Figure 1) is really the most obvious, and the one that triggered this entire exploration when NE suggested the existence of a Catch-22 situation. Here, the system requires that Black women "scream and yell". But the system does not like it and certainly does not recognise its own role in necessitating

3 We use the word 'system' here to highlight the apparent systemic character of this. However, our decision has the consequence of obscuring the fact that what we are actually talking about is colleagues (generally white and/or male). Perhaps this is a narrative trick to soothe the consciences of two of the authors of this paper?

such expressions of anger. It therefore reacts to necessary expressions of anger from Black women with disrespect, sabotage, and the blaming of Black women. These systemic aggressions inevitably provoke the experience of anger in the Black women victims. Short of superhuman self-discipline, it is inevitable that this anger experienced by Black women will eventually be expressed in some form or another within the system. And so, the loop will continue and is highly likely to escalate – aggression, anger, aggression, anger, ...

The second positive feedback loop is really a subloop of loop 1. Hence, we labelled it 1a in Figure 1. There is some evidence in our excerpts of efforts on the part of participants to suppress the anger that they feel in response to the systemic aggressions against them. Generally speaking, their aim in taking on this 'work' of suppression is presumably to regulate the positive feedback loop and mitigate against destructive escalation, perhaps to protect Black women who follow. As P6 put it:

> OK, so now over and above what you are doing, you are also trying to ensure that you are not the one that actually proves the stereotype that is there that will close doors for the next set of Black females that are behind you. [P6]

We speculated[4] about the likely stress that such suppression of emotions might cause for Black women managers, and a sense of rising anger and frustration that it might likely lead to. We considered the likelihood that, should this suppressive filter 'fail', as it inevitably must, the expression of anger that would follow might *appear* to be out of proportion with whatever specific incident triggered the 'failure' – a last straw sort of effect. This would, of course, feed back directly into loop 1 and serve as 'wonderful' ammunition to label the victim as having "issues", as being "emotional", as being unreasonable or irrational. In short, as being an "Angry Black Woman".

The third loop (loop 2 in Figure 1) is in many ways similar to loop 1, except that in this loop, the aggression arising from the system in the form of sabotage specifically leads to negative impacts on the performance of the Black women who are its targets. Anyone who is 'normally' competitive, ambitious, or committed to the delivery of whatever they do will certainly resent such constraints on their performance. As such, they will experience anger and frustration. It is inevitable. This experience of anger is likely to follow the same pathway as loop 1: through a suppressive filter and into expressions of anger and from there to further aggressive backlash, including acts of sabotage.

Finally, in terms of loop 2a, this is really an instance of us adding two and two and coming to six, rather than something that was explicitly described in the interviews. But it stands to reason that decreased performance by Black women managers as a result of sabotage will inevitably be met with aggression from the system, which already sees their appointments as a token, especially in the forms of disrespect and blaming. This will then feed into the major feedback loop 1.

4 At least KM and NE did. For NN, this was less speculative due to her first-hand experiences.

Will these loops ever end? We think that this is perhaps best answered with a final excerpt:

> If I can put it that way, yeah. So there is a difference, and I think it's just also historical because if you look at the history of South Africa, umm Black females were the lowest on hierarchy of anything: Pay. Uh, opportunity, you name it, right? So it's those legacy things … and again back to the mindset that I was talking about and the perceptions that people have. That you, might not, you're not gonna change necessarily a person who's got 32 teeth in their mouth. Like they're all grown. They've developed habits and all of that, you know. [P5]

In short, while the system has "32 teeth in [its] mouth", it seems unlikely.

5. But what does the literature say?

This was the pattern that emerged in our consciousness (that we 'discovered' or had 'confirmed' for us), largely inductively from our re-analysis of KM's data. As already noted, the only real engagement with the literature undertaken up to this point was a reading of Motro et al.'s (2022) paper. But this is academia, and our story would be naked without a half-proper effort on our part to relate our newfound consciousness to what has already been written. So, we ventured a little more earnestly into the literatures on the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype (Ahmed, 2009; Corbin et al., 2018; Doharty, 2019; Fears & Combs, 2013; Jones & Norwood, 2017; Motro et al., 2022; Williams, 2001) and gendered racial aggression (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Miller, 2020).

It is perhaps appropriate to start with Motro et al. (2022) since this was the one paper which we had engaged with before the re-analysis of KM's data, which led to our conceptualisation in Figure 1. Their main emphasis was on the activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype (by locating the origin of any anger expressed by Black women as internal to the Black woman) and the impact of such activations on the performance evaluations of Black women in the workplace. To investigate these two issues, they conducted two formal experimental studies which demonstrated statistically a) the activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype and b) the negative impact of this activation on performance evaluations of Black women. Not surprisingly, given that we had read Motro et al. (2022) before we started our analysis, we too noted the system's tendency to locate the origin of anger expressed by Black women as internal to the Black woman. Jones and Norwood (2017) confirmed this pattern in their study, which is anchored in an autoethnographic reflection on more everyday encounters with the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype. They referred to it as the "phenomenon of displaced blame" (Jones & Norwood, 2017:2021). This was the blaming the victim form of aggression against Black women that we identified.

Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) focused on systematically examining gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions against Black women specifically – "subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (Lewis et al., 2016:758). Their work led them to

develop a taxonomy comprising three main categories of aggressions that they claimed are likely to be experienced by Black women: a) "projected stereotypes"; b) "silenced and marginalized"; and c) "style and beauty assumptions". In terms of projected stereotypes, in Lewis and Neville (2015), they suggested three common types of stereotypes, namely the "Angry Black Woman", the "Strong Black Woman", and the "Jezebel" (the characterisation of Black women as seductive and sexually wanton).

In Lewis et al. (2016), they dropped the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype. Of course, our entire story in this article started with NE being kindly guided to the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype as a potential explanation for some of the patterns that emerged during the supervisor review of KM's draft analysis. As such, this was *the* central feature of our 'findings'. In terms of the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype, it rather liberally simplifying matters. In many ways the "Strong Black Woman" sits, or rather is expected to sit, in the "Suppression" box in our model where she is expected to take the aggressions thrown at her and bear them stoically (see Corbin et al., 2018). But more on this a little later. We did not find very much evidence for the "Jezebel" stereotype. One of the participants did relate a situation where she had planned to get a lift to an out-of-town conference with a male colleague, but that at the last minute the colleague had cancelled because his wife was not happy with the arrangement. But this was not attributed to her intersectional identity as a Black woman but seemed to be a pure gender issue.

In terms of Lewis and Neville's (2015) and Lewis et al.'s (2016) second category of gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions, their "silenced and marginalized" category, they again identified two sub-categories: a) Black women's struggle for respect and b) their sense of being invisible. Both of these were plainly evident in our results, although we lumped them into a category which we labelled 'disrespect'. What we didn't find in KM's data was any sort of reference to the third category of aggressions relating to "styles and beauty assumptions". There are, we suppose, a number of possible explanations for this. In their paper, Lewis et al. (2016) noted how context may well dictate the prevalence of particular 'micro'-aggressions. In this regard, our work was conducted in the workplace rather than in social settings. In contrast, from the literature that we engaged with at least, many of the cases describing "style and beauty assumption" aggressions seemed to have taken place in more social settings (often involving drunk White men). It is possible that this contextual hypothesis might also explain the near absence of the Jezebel stereotype in our findings? Beyond this, in the South African context specifically, since the technical end of apartheid in 1994 significant conscious 'effort' has been made, in advertising and media spaces in particular, to reframe beauty and style norms around demographic majorities.

It was a little surprising to us that Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) did not mention direct sabotage in their taxonomy of 'micro'-aggressions. But we did find a more generic source of confirmation of our findings in the general literature on stereotyping. Fiske et al. (2007) proposed a general stereotype content model which comprised a two-dimensional space of competence and warmth perceptions. In KM's data, we found

easy references to instances where participants described being viewed as having low competence. For example, P1 said:

> I think for me, what I've picked up, it could be just my perception as well as black females. We, people tend to … what do you call this thing? No trust in our experiences, no trust in our skills, capability. Even if you've done the same degree, you've gone through the same training, they still question your capabilities in terms of technical skills. [P1]

And we also found many excerpts supporting that Black women were viewed as a threat (i.e. low warmth). For example, P3 noted how:

> … he felt threatened for the fact that I was a female, black, and on top of that, I knew more than he knew. [P3]

According to Fiske et al.'s (2007) model, the general affective response to people who are stereotyped as being low competence and low warmth is likely to be contempt, while the behavioural response is likely to be what they referred to as "harm" (both passive and active). Active harm and sabotage are cut from the same cloth.

The work by Miller (2020) focused on the sub-phenomena in the top part of our conceptualisation. She took the formal aggression scale that Lewis and Neville (2015) had defined and examined the relationships between the components of this and an anger scale, the State Trait Anger Expression Inventory-II developed by Spielberger (1999) among a sample of African American women. In doing this, she was able to quantitatively examine a) the *experience* of anger arising out of 'micro'-aggressions, b) the *suppression* of this anger, and c) the *expression* of this anger. Not surprisingly, her results revealed significant stress associated with constantly existing in this space (our loop 1a). Corbin et al. (2018) also considered the experiences of Black women "trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman" (Corbin et al., 2018:1) from a qualitative perspective. The narrative richness of their work really aided us in clarifying several aspects of our findings and confirming a more general character of these. Although they did not make it a central finding, they did note, with reference to something Vanessa Williams said, a similar effect to the contextually imposed need for expressing anger that several of our participants reported:

> As Vanessa Williams (2017) writes, 'When it's time to rumble, everybody looks to you to make the first swing. And if you don't show up, some folks are upset or suspicious, wondering whether you've lost your super powers or maybe cut a deal…' (Corbin et al., 2018:9)

Since they also noted how Black women's "justified angry responses are maligned and dismissed" (Corbin et al., 2018:3), there is an implicit confirmation of the contradiction, the apparent Catch-22 situation, which initially triggered our entire reflexive journey.

They also confirmed two additional features of our conceptualisation. Firstly, they confirmed the sense of dissonance expressed by several of our participants with reference to "I have to scream and yell". They noted how the images of Black women as

either angry or strong "'dehumanize and control' Black women (e.g. Collins, 1986) and deny them opportunities at true self-definition" (Corbin et al., 2018:4). Finally, besides reporting the stress of 'being' in "misogynoir" (Corbin et al., 2018:1), they emphasised the perpetual nature of this stress: "a sense of perpetual unfairness and consistent racial frustration" (Corbin et al., 2018:10). Or, as Jones and Norwood (2017:2030) put it: "Aggressive Encounters: Death by a Thousand Cuts".

6. Conclusion

What then does this article contribute? we asked ourselves. From the reflection on the literature, we can see that there is really no element in our conceptualisation that has not been reported somewhere else. Corbin et al. (2018), Jones and Norwood (2017), and Motro et al. (2022) all described manifestations of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, the 'blaming of the victim', and the perpetual character of this. Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) characterised most of the aggressions that our participants reported experiencing. And the sabotage that they didn't report is, it seems, easily predicted based on Fiske et al.'s (2007) general work on stereotypes. Corbin et al. (2018) and Miller (2020) unpacked the experience of anger/suppression of anger/"I have to scream and yell" dynamic that we identified, as well as the dissonances that may emerge. And Corbin et al. (2018) noted the necessary nature of having to be angry, thereby implying the Catch-22 nature of all of this, which had triggered our reflection in the first place. However, the fact that our reflection on the reported experiences allowed us to pull all these aspects of the experiences of Black women into a conceptualisation does constitute a contribution.

Beyond this, we suppose that one might argue that our study makes a contribution in the sense that the empirical work was conducted in a country where Black women are not demographically a minority. In fact, quite the contrary, they are demographically the largest group. We have not seen the patterns we describe reported in such a context previously. Most of the work on this has emerged out of the United States with a few papers from other countries in the global north. But this geographical extension of findings in itself would hardly constitute a significant contribution, particularly in a global academic hegemony where case studies from Africa are so often dismissed as parochial and not globally relevant (Eccles, 2021). We might, we suppose, have made something more of this, by reflecting on how it might come to be that even in contexts where Black women are demographically the largest population group, they might still suffer under these states of systemic gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions. In this regard, we could perhaps have discussed the possibility that these patterns have metastasised from the global north via the miserable paths of colonisation in the past, and coloniality today. But we did not do this.

Instead, what we have done here, and what we think is a little different from anything else that we have seen in the literature, is to tell the story of *our* exploration of the experiences of Black women. Substantively, we have done this from the perspective of the surprised ignorance of KM and NE as traditional springs[5] of misogynoir, with NN, a

5 Perhaps a better metaphor here would be French drains?

Black woman, watching on somewhat bemused and somewhat comforted by a sense of confirmation. At the risk of foregrounding the male and/or white experience, we think it is worthwhile to draw some 'conclusions' on the question of where this reflexive journey has left KM and NE specifically.

Firstly, we (KM and NE) would be complete fools not to recall that we both still have "32 teeth in [our mouths]" [P5]. In other words, we would be very hesitant to conclude that we have been 'cured' of our misogynoir tendencies, in spite of having been graced with this opportunity to 'hear' the experiences of Black women through KM's interviews, and under NN's patient guidance. However, we have taken some comfort from Jones and Norwood's (2017:2069) optimistic conclusion that: "Listening to the voices of Black women not only renders the experiences of Black women visible, it also has the potential to transform understandings of racism and sexism". Certainly, we (KM and NE) are unlikely to witness the angry expressions of Black women and the experiences that cause them in the same way ever again. We have been afforded a very different framework for interpreting these to our default common senses before we began this journey.

Which brings us to conscientisation, the recognition of contradiction, and from this, acting against oppression. Quite early on, we recognised the contradiction and worked to elaborate on it. But conscientisation requires action. Corbin et al. (2018:9) note how "[w]hen one is consistently positioned as the sole purveyor of experiential knowledge for a racially marginalized group, particularly in a setting that requires and/or encourages engagement, the pressure to speak up, to dispute ignorant or malicious statements, or simply 'represent well,' becomes heightened and burdensome". By taking the opportunity presented in the space of appearance opened in this special issue to share the experiential knowledge that has been graciously curated by one of us (NN) and shared with two of us (KM and NE), we hope to lessen the burden of representation even if only in a minuscule way. This is our hopeful political act. NN and NE are somewhat sheepish in this hope, having harshly warned KM about the risks of being over-optimistic.

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My interview with a mountain: A curious and imaginative practice of speculative fabulation

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Abstract

How do we listen to the unheard voices of the landscape and tell their stories? This article explores Hannah Arendt's concept of plurality, Ursula Le Guin's storytelling, and Aldo Leopold's ecological philosophy to understand and engage with multispecies stories. Through a storytelling session with a coffee farmer and a speculative interview with a mountain, inspired by Le Guin's (2015 [1974]) short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', this article conducts a playful and creative act of fabulation. Moving beyond Arendt's (2018) concept of plurality, it considers a political space open to heterogeneity. This approach invites reflection on organisations' ethical obligations concerning heterogeneity. By relating Arendt's ideas to Leopold's (1949) idea to "think like a mountain", the article highlights how both perspectives encourage a broader, more ethical engagement with the world. This interdisciplinary exploration bridges creativity, philosophy, and ethics, creating a deeper connection between humans and the worlds around us.

1. Introduction

> And with them, or after them, may there not come that even bolder adventurer – the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate, transient lyrics of the lichen, will read beneath it the still less communicative, still more passive, wholly atemporal, cold, volcanic poetry of the rocks: each one a word spoken, how long ago, by the earth itself (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:303).

Sustainability is often viewed as a choice between ecological and social priorities. Yet, the crises we face today – environmental destruction, social injustice, economic inequality – are deeply

interconnected, cascading and mutually reinforcing. More specifically, we are experiencing what is described as a poly-crisis: a situation where multiple crises overlap and interact, amplifying their overall impact. According to The World Economic Forum (2023), a poly-crisis occurs when economic, environmental, geopolitical, and social challenges reinforce each other, creating a more complex and severe global threat. These interconnected crises create a complex web of challenges that are increasingly difficult to address in isolation. The suffering of millions is entangled with the suffering of our planet, and they are not so easily separated into neat and distinct categories.

However, the poly-crisis is not a product of happenstance but a result of deeper, underlying structures (Chakrabarty, 2021). This complex web of crises stems from a failure in our abilities to perceive, engage with, reflect on, and relate to various realities (Cooper et al., 2024). These failures form a meta-crisis, driving a multitude of crises due to systemic failures in our social, political, economic, and environmental structures. For instance, Ergene et al. (2024) discuss how current solutions to the grand challenges often perpetuate racial inequality. They argue that addressing climate change requires feminist and postcolonial epistemologies rooted in racial justice, necessitating a paradigmatic transformation in social and environmental research in management and organisational studies. Their work points to inadequacies in our systems of knowledge, governance, and ethical responsibilities, which fail to account for the entangled nature of social and environmental injustices. According to Bruno Latour (2018), social justice needs to be redefined in light of climate change, which defines the entire political order, influencing our understanding of identity, subsistence, and attachment to place. As we grapple with the meta-crisis, conventional, human-centred perspectives are insufficient. These complex challenges call for new ways of thinking and being that transcend traditional frameworks.

New frameworks, which invite marginalised perspectives and acknowledge the broader social, ecological, and ethical dimensions often overlooked, need to be conceptualised. Inspired by Ursula Le Guin's (2015 [1974]) exploration of non-human language in her short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', this article blends creative writing with ecological insights. It moves beyond Arendt's concept of plurality (2018) to consider a political space open to heterogeneity (McCullagh, 2019). Deleuze's (2006) notion of fabulation and Haraway's (2016) call for multispecies collaboration further inform this study, highlighting the importance of collecting stories of the landscape.

Attuning to Aldo Leopold's (1949) call to "think like a mountain", this article seeks to understand how the voices we encounter can provide insight into how we can open the political space to heterogeneity, necessary for reconciling ecological and social sustainability. Featuring an affective storytelling session with a coffee farmer in Puerto Rico and a speculative interview with the mountain he cultivates, the exploration reveals the reciprocal relationship between humans and landscapes, uncovering personal, cultural, and ecological histories. The speculative interview, a creative act, invites us to think *with* more-than-human others and embrace heterogeneity as a crucial part of organisational thought. Utilising the "we-voice" (Bekhta, 2017), the Mountain's story

resists reduction to a singular perspective, emphasising its collective identity and challenging traditional frameworks.

The article is organised as follows: First, we take a quick look at multispecies research as an emerging field, focusing on the importance of multispecies storytelling. Following the mountain path, I introduce the farmer and his story, a practical example of multispecies storytelling. We then explore Aldo Leopold's land ethic, Ursula Le Guin's short story, and Hannah Arendt's concepts of plurality and storytelling, contextualising the stories within broader philosophical and ecological discussions. The article concludes by synthesising insights from the stories and theoretical explorations, highlighting implications for organisational thought and practice. This section emphasises the need for heterogeneity in organisational approaches and invites readers to engage in multispecies storytelling as a means of ethical re-worlding. Woven throughout the text are excerpts from my interview with the Mountain. These excerpts serve to illustrate the concept of speculative fabulation and its role in creating new ways of thinking and relating, offering moments to disengage and to embrace moments of disorientation.

Researcher: Can you tell me a little about yourself?

Mountain: Where to start? There is so much to tell! We are not as simple as we look. We are complex with layers of history, but we can start at the very beginning. We erupted from the ocean floor. Breaking through the ocean's surface spewing lava and ash into the sky announcing our arrival, it was spectacular! Did you know that part of us is Pacific crustal rock. Imagine that! All the way from the Pacific. When most think of mountains they think we are sedentary, always standing sentinel but even in our slow movement we can never truly sit still. Like most youth we eventually calmed down, the eruptions ceased, and we began to cool off and hardened ourselves. Once rain began to fall our volcanic rock eroded into soil. The first pioneers, hardy mosses and lichens took root and over time came ferns and shrubs, transforming us into green forests. Soon more complex plants began to grow, like the soil and the rocks, the plants, animals, rivers have all become a part of us.

2. A quick word regarding multispecies storytelling

Engaging with more-than-human perspectives can help organisations consider ethical and sustainable practices that acknowledge the heterogeneous collective of voices shaping our world and practices. Storytelling is a form of resistance against the limitations of our thinking, promoting a reimagined organisational landscape that is attuned to ecological and social realities. By merging philosophical, ecological, and creative storytelling approaches, this study highlights the need for heterogeneity in organisational thought and practice. It challenges us to rethink how we listen to the world around us, inviting others to engage in multispecies storytelling as a means of ethical re-worlding in response to the interconnected crises we face.

Having a conversation or conducting an interview with a mountain may seem fanciful or whimsical. However, this unconventional method uncovers valuable insights into hidden perspectives and offers us a chance to explore the heterogeneity of our collective world with polite curiosity. Polite curiosity (Despret, 2005, 2016) is a form of attentive, respectful inquiry that involves listening and engaging with others, human and non-human, without imposing one's assumptions or dominating the interaction. To engage with polite curiosity with the unheard voices of the more-than-human world, we must approach the stories of beaches, rivers, forests, lichen, ants, and penguins with openness and respect, allowing them to reshape our understanding.

Multispecies research is growing (Hartigan, 2021; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Kohn, 2013; Ogden et al., 2013; Van Dooren et al., 2016; Westerlaken, 2020). Within this subfield, multispecies storytelling is referred to as a methodology or critical research approach that can draw attention to the plurality of voices and temporalities, decentre the human, and foreground intra-active transformation (Hohti & Tammi, 2023). Rantala and Höckert (2023:63) cultivate "the art of attentiveness with multispecies actors living at the margins of our everyday attention", suggesting that much of the world exists beyond our scope of awareness. Similarly, inter-species stories, as noted by Van Dooren (2014), can reconnect humans with the ongoing impacts of environmental destruction. McEwan (2022) advances more-than-human and non-human geographies by considering plant agency in contested ecologies, using phytography to conceptualise plants as agentic storytellers. McEwan argues that to engage in multispecies storytelling with plants helps better conceptualise the ethics and contested ecologies associated with biodiversity loss. Through case studies of proteas, McEwan explores how we come to know plants and what kind of ethics emerges from this engagement.

In their exploration of posthuman affirmative business ethics, Sayers et al. (2021) argue that feminist speculative fiction is a resource for reimagining ethical relations between humans and non-humans. Valtonen and Pullen (2021) explore the emotional and ethical bonds between humans and rocks. As they recount their encounters with rocks, from the Arctic to Australia, they acknowledge the agency of the rocks, advocating for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the Earth. Anna Tsings's book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), follows the ecological and commercial legacies of the matsutake mushroom, combining human and non-human elements, to explore world-making projects in the Anthropocene. Through her study, we find the different ways mushrooms, humans, and other beings interrelate, highlighting the complexities of ecological systems and the interconnectedness of life in the Anthropocene. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway argues for multispecies collaboration and storytelling as a response to the Anthropocene. Haraway's approach emphasises the necessity of engaging with a diverse 'we', encouraging *thinking-with* and kinship for ecological re-worlding.

In the works of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, fabulation is a concept that unites art and philosophy, influencing the way we conceptualise the Earth and its inhabitants (Wiame, 2018). For Deleuze, the new Earth "to be fabulated is an earth for and of

thought" (Wiame, 2018:537). Ronald Bogue (2010:9) characterises Deleuzian fabulation as an experimentation on the real, a process that aligns with the need to develop new narratives and ethical frameworks that better address sustainability concerns and our entanglement with the world through the act of fabulating a new Earth. Additionally, Bogue (2007, 2010) explains that Deleuze takes up Henri Bergson's notion of fabulation and gives it political meaning, suggesting that the act of storytelling can be a form of political action and transformation. Fabulation is both creative and collective. Though Deleuze never had the chance to elaborate further on the political sense of fabulating, storytelling is at the core of Arendt's political philosophy. The act of fabulating or telling stories of the new Earth emphasises the role of imagination and creativity in shaping new understandings and relationships with the world. The new Earth is not to be discovered, but actively created through thought and stories.

Researcher: What do you like about being a mountain?

Mountain: What we like about being a mountain? …ehh…hmm… We like to think of ourselves as a keeper of stories. We preserve, share and pass down stories through time. The stories are etched into every stone and tree. The coffee plants that thrive on, around, and with us do so because we were fiery youth, and over time, the conditions became just right. You can taste our story in the coffee. We are the coffee, and the coffee is us. We are reptiles, amphibians, shrews, and mongooses. We are iguanas basking in the sun and bats fluttering at dusk, the sound of the flowing rivers and the fish. These are all our stories, and we are theirs.

3. Along the mountain path

As we journey down the mountain path, let us explore the entanglement of a mountain through storytelling sessions with a coffee farmer in Puerto Rico and a speculative interview. The storytelling sessions with the farmer involved two in-depth conversations about his relationship with the land and his experiences in farming, revealing the intricate relations between farmer and mountain. This writing builds on previous research (Trägårdh, 2020) in organisational studies, where I explored the stories of farmers. Finding stories of farmers tangled with the land they cultivate helped me to start thinking differently about organising for sustainability and collaboration. The research engaged with Bruno Latour's (2018) concept of the *Terrestrial*, a political orientation that emphasises knowledge, sensitivity, and care for otherness, to explore what it means to live and organise among the earthbound.

During five sessions, farmers generously shared stories about their journeys into farming, their love of the land, and their disillusionment with the island's political situation. I was struggling with writer's block while trying to figure out how to approach the data. Despite the farmers' generosity, something was missing. To deal with my writer's block and to get out of my head, I decided to take a break and enjoy a moment of creativity.

I had no intention of doing anything with it. I just wanted to remind myself to play, and so sought refuge in creative writing.

Inspired by Le Guin's storytelling (2015 [1974]), whom we will visit shortly, I engaged in an exercise of speculative fabulation, writing a short story from the perspective of a mountain in Puerto Rico, a silent witness to the ebb and flow of human existence. I found myself not thinking *for* or *about* the mountain but *with* it. Unbeknownst to myself, this creative endeavour would later emerge as the key to unveiling the stories I didn't realise were absent, marking a transformative journey. It was what helped find the missing piece. Taking those insights a step further, I thought I would ask the Mountain itself for its stories.

The speculative interview involved listening to the landscape and exploring often-overlooked geologic stories while encountering the strangeness and challenges of engaging with the otherness of the world. Engaging in multispecies storytelling through speculative interviews involves a process of exploration and significant shifts in thinking that are far more radical than one might expect. I know that I can never actually know what the Mountain will say, but I can pretend otherwise. I began with a simple question, "Can you tell me about yourself?", and I let my imagination visit the southern end of an island in the Atlantic Ocean, to the Cordillera Central mountain range, where on the side of a mountain, a river flows past a small wooden house, coffee grows along the slopes, and a farmer leads his horse to slowly and carefully pick beans.

3.1 Becoming-mountain

The speculative interview with the Mountain was an attempt at an act of creation. At the Tuesday lecture series at the FEMIS film foundation in 1987, Gilles Deleuze gave a lecture 'What is the Creative Act?' (Deleuze, 2006). During his lecture, Deleuze explored creativity across fields including cinema, philosophy, and science. Deleuze (2006:314) noted that each field tells stories in different ways: philosophy with concepts, cinema with blocks of movements/duration, painting invents blocks of lines/colours, and science creates functions. He argued that creativity is the actualisation of the virtual, where new possibilities and realities are brought into existence. Creative acts, according to Deleuze, differ from communication, as communication is the transmission and propagation of information whereas a work of art is an act of resistance, "[o]nly the act of resistance resists death, either as a work of art or as human struggle" (Deleuze, 2006:324). Deleuze connected art to human struggle by suggesting that every work of art calls upon people who do not yet exist. The true connection between art and a people that do not yet exist remains unclear (Deleuze, 2006:324). Art is, therefore, not only a reflection of current realities but transcends the present moment.

Elaine Scarry (2001:112) refers to aesthetic experiences as "small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space [so that] we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before". Similarly, according to Deleuze, art creates new forms of thinking that disrupt conventionally accepted perspectives. The creative act is closely tied to fabulation, which Deleuze describes as

the ability of storytelling to invent new worlds, futures, and becomings (Wiame, 2018). Through fabulation, creative acts not only reflect but also construct new stories, thus connecting deeply with the creation of people who are yet to come. The creative act is life-affirming, and for Deleuze and Guattari, "life, from the beginning, is collective and political" (Saldanha & Stark, 2016:435). Our existence is deeply entangled with collective experience and power dynamics. As the Mountain, we do not exist in isolation. Though we may appear solitary, we are part of larger networks and structures that shape and are shaped by our lives.

These exercises were approached as an alternative reality, where we can speak to and know the non-communicative others of the landscape. This approach allowed for a deeper engagement through the we-voice (Bekhta, 2017). The we-voice is a plural voice that emanates from groups, communities, collectives, or nations, rather than individual characters. It captures a collective subjectivity that cannot be reduced to a single I-voice. According to Bekhta (2020), the we-voice does not reduce a collection of individual identities, or a mix of voices. The experience of the Mountain, for instance, cannot be reduced to a singular perspective. The rocks, plants, animals, and atmospheric conditions are all part of the Mountain's identity. Together, they comprise the collective subjectivity of the we-voice. Reducing the Mountain to a singular 'I' would be to oversimplify the story of the Mountain. The we-voice helps capture social and communal aspects of the Mountain's identity, highlighting how individuals within a group are entangled and how their collective identities shape experiences.

Exploring heterogeneity from the perspective of a mountain on a tropical island allowed my imagination to go visiting, to listen to the voices hidden beneath the rocks and roots that tell the stories of time and change, and to think of the Mountain as a way to embrace the multiplicity within oneself. Importantly, this involves making agential cuts, which "do not mark some absolute separation but a cutting together/apart – 'holding together' of the disparate itself" (Barad, 2012:46). These cuts are "the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce 'objects' and 'subjects,' and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality" (Barad, 2007:92-93). For example, in this case, the collective 'we' refers to a single mountain within a larger mountain range. The agential cut distinguishes this mountain from 'they' (the other mountains in the range) and 'it' (a singular rock). Agential cuts are momentary stabilisations, doings rather than beings, that at once define what is inside and outside. Detecting these cuts involves creating them, and creating them involves performing phenomena by diffracting different types of agencies – in other words, how different agencies interact and influence the phenomena under observation. In this context, the agential cut highlights that our understanding and interaction with the Mountain requires active participation and boundary-shaping, which in turn influences our perceptions and engagement.

Through these interactions, we not only shape our understanding of the Mountain but also recognise the importance of perspective in these relationships. This became clear when I read the story I had written from the perspective of a mountain, for the farmer, and his subsequent response, which was the key to opening my thinking. After our interaction,

I found myself standing in a different relation to the world. The farmer is a retired IT specialist in his late 60s who returned to the island after living in the continental United States for 40 years. He is restoring his grandfather's home, which had been abandoned for decades. The farmer has also returned to cultivating coffee with traditional methods, which work with the mountain and preserve biodiversity. It allowed me to think *with* the Mountain instead of *for*. I was sitting in Sweden and could not fly to Puerto Rico and drive into the mountains to sit and listen to what it had to say. Even if I could spend my days walking mountain paths, listening to parrots squawking and babbling brooks, how do I argue that it is a credible interpretation of data with conclusions that are plausible and defensible? In *thinking with*, I translated what I imagined a story the Mountain could tell and told it. For geologists, strata tell stories. Stories about the world that existed long before the hominid species took their first bipedal steps. I am not fluent in the language of geology, but I can imagine otherwise.

When I spoke with the coffee farmer for the first time in May, we discussed farming in general, his neighbours, and his opinions on what he thought Puerto Rico needed. "We lost that connection to the land," "[t]hey take and take, and what are we, the Puerto Ricans, what is for us?" "We are dependent on ships for everything. The tomatoes you buy at the store aren't from here," "LUMA [the electric company] can't even keep our lights on. We lose our electricity all the time. How can you live when you don't know when and for how long you will have electricity?" Although I framed the interviews as storytelling sessions, most of the responses I received were direct and focused. The farmer spoke with frustration, critical and concerned, not without reason, addressing collective issues and offering valuable insights into life on an island, suffering under colonialism, as a farmer yearning for change.

> Formed from underwater volcanic activity, we emerged from the ocean's surface millions of years ago. Our story is that of the land – of the soil. Covered in lush vegetation, our health is fundamental for all life. 4,000 years ago, humans began to call us home. Our human inhabitants have feared, revered, embraced, and abandoned us. It was the Spanish who introduced us to coffee. Our volcanic soil, elevation, and the shade we provide make our coffee extraordinary in flavour. When the Americans arrived, they saw no use for us. Coffee production is laborious and difficult, and the markets craved the sweetness of white gold. Some farmers stayed and cultivated crops with us, but it was only a matter of time before they abandoned us for work in the factories. We remain, offering refuge from storms, the heat, conquistadors, plantation owners, industrialisation, and urbanisation. The footsteps of humans are returning. Rediscovering the history that they thought they abandoned in the name of progress. (Story shared by the farmer)

Three months after our first interview, I wrote my story from the perspective of the Mountain. On a whim and with hesitation, I called the coffee farmer to read it to him. The story of the Mountain triggered something in him. From the Mountain itself, we

follow the farmer as he revisits his memories of visiting his grandfather, explaining why he decided to return to farming.

> I used to visit my grandfather that lived in a wooden house in the mountains close to the river. We would watch as my grandfather would come down the mountain with his horse that carried two large baskets full of freshly picked coffee beans. He would lay out large pieces of burlap that he sewed together from old sacks and spread them out on the river rocks. He would scatter the coffee beans on the burlap to dry in the sun. Then, after they dried, he would collect the beans and put them in this large metal bowl to shake off the skins. From there, my grandfather would take the beans and put them into these big, big cast iron pans that sat on a wood fire and roast the beans, always moving them with this big wooden paddle. When he was finished doing that, the next day he would put them in paper bags and take them to the marketplace. He would sell his coffee beans to those people who owned these large coffee factories.
>
> Before, people didn't pay attention to the past. It was a beautiful time, beautiful memories with family. Nothing now is the same. Everything is machines and technology. Life changes. It's easy to do it with technology but it was better before. Families were together, doing stuff together. Watching your grandparents making coffee. I remember watching my grandfather grinding coffee to give to people. One time, my grandfather was putting out a burlap onto the river rocks when my grandmother started screaming "Las Piedras están cantando" [The rocks are singing]. She meant the river was coming, but my grandfather didn't have time to get the coffee, and the river came and swoosh and washed away all his hard work. He lost a lot of time with that. Sometimes, me and my brothers and sisters were given baskets to help pick beans. My grandfather kept yelling at us to watch where we were stepping, "Aj! Aj! Aj! Don't step on my babies." He meant the new beans that were sprouting.
>
> You know, after my grandfather died and my uncles left for New York there was no one left to pick the beans. They left for New York because they wanted to have another life. It was only my mother and her two sisters that stayed in Puerto Rico. For a long time, no one wanted to be a farmer. We wanted something better. They didn't know what they had. Leaving for the city to work for other people.
>
> The farm was abandoned for years. When I got older, I missed that kind of life. I wanted to go back. I think coffee is a good way to sustain people. I like to cultivate the way it was before, not now – using so many chemicals. I'd like to bring back that kind of life – the old time way.

As soon as I read the last line of my story, it was as if the river of memories came rushing and I was allowed to listen to the rocks singing. The inspiration I drew from him sparked his imagination. Something other than the simple exchange of information had occurred. "A story is a collaboration between teller and audience, writer and reader. Fiction is not only illusion, but collision" (Le Guin, 2004:230). The stories are intersubjective; by offering a piece of myself, he reciprocated and offered a piece of himself. "Words are events, they do things, change things […] they feed energy back and forth and amplify it" (Le Guin, 2004:199). Through words and the sharing of stories, we both became teller and listener.

The stories he told give us insight into the farmer, his motivation and his connection to the mountain and the river. We are transported to another time, to another place, and we understand the allure of returning to a place filled with family and love. The joy in his stories is infectious. We can hear the grandmother yelling out the window and see his grandfather rushing, stumbling, slipping on the rocks trying to save his harvest before the rushing rapids wash it away. We get a sense of the care that was taken in tending to the beans, the respect for the river, and the sense of home found on the mountain. The focus shifts from socio-economic issues and frustration with infrastructure to personal and familial history, nostalgia, and a connection to cultural history. The detailed descriptions of the scene and activities create a feeling of intimacy and personal significance. New characters, such as the horse, the rocks, and the river, are introduced. The farmer's story is descriptive and reflective, focusing on personal memories and cultural traditions. A different story is told.

Researcher: Time. That is an interesting concept for a mountain. How do you experience time? And how do you manage the different temporalities that unfold on, around, and through you?

Mountain: Hmmm. We haven't really thought about it. We suppose we don't experience time the same way you do, you can almost say that at our core we experience a near atemporality all the while different temporalities express how we experience life. Ancient and patient geologic time sculpted us, shaping our peaks and valleys over eons. Ecological time defines us, as forests grow and change over centuries and recently the unexpected rhythms of humans surprise us. Every night we listen to the coqui frogs and every morning we watch parrots take flight. These different temporalities are what give us our rhythm. It's within these rhythms and cycles that there is change.

4. With whom I think: Storytellers and thinkers

The ethical engagement with the world through multispecies stories brings us to Aldo Leopold, Hannah Arendt, and Ursula Le Guin. In this section, we read Arendt together with Leopold, who brings insights into the interconnectedness of ecological and political realms. Leopold's 'The Land Ethic' and call to '[Think] Like a Mountain' challenge us to expand our idea of community to include more-than-human entities, while Arendt's exploration of the political space emphasises the need for inclusivity and diversity. However, as McCullagh (2019) argues, opening our community as Leopold suggests necessitates a corresponding openness in our political spaces to heterogeneity. Between these discussions, we visit Le Guin's short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', which further enriches our understanding of these themes.

4.1 Aldo Leopold's ecological philosophy

Aldo Leopold coined the term 'think like a mountain' in his essay by the same name in his book *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, published in 1949, which became a foundational text for the environmental movement. Leopold was a prominent American conservationist who argued that Western ethical frameworks needed to expand to embrace the land, an idea he referred to as 'The Land Ethic' (1949). The essay recounts Leopold's experience of witnessing a shot wolf slowly die. At the time, it was widely believed that reducing the wolf population would lead to more deer and increased hunting opportunities. However, "[…] after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view" (Leopold, 1949:130). In that moment, Leopold realised that the removal of a single species could have profound repercussions for the entire ecosystem. "The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea" (Leopold, 1949:132). This perspective of ecosystems and land situates our ethical responsibility to maintain "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold, 1949:224-225).

Leopold wrote, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" adding that "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (Leopold, 1949:204). Today, much like in 1949, our relationship with the land remains fundamentally economic, "entailing privileges but not obligations" (Leopold, 1949:203). *Homo sapiens* have not relinquished the role of conquerors, continually asserting the right to freely use the land without acknowledging any obligation towards it. However, Leopold (1949:223) recognised that the value of ecological communities is not economic but philosophical. According to Leopold (1949:209), land ethic requires an ecological conscience, where "obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land". In principle, enlarging the boundaries of the community seems a simple task. All you have to do is extend your social conscience and recognise your place within a larger ecosystem – however, that is easier said than done.

This challenge goes beyond recognising your place in the ecosystem. It is also political. It is a problem of recognition and who we recognise as legitimate members. According to Arendt, to be fully recognised, an individual must engage in public acts and speech (Arendt, 1998). When the speech and acts of Others are not recognised, it becomes difficult to admit them into the public space and enlarge the boundaries of the community. However, Le Guin's exploration of the language of animals, decades before the discovery that African elephants have names for each other (Pardo et al., 2024), the sophistication of chicken communication (Marino, 2017), that a peacock's train is a multimodal communication device which includes infrasonic signals (Freeman & Hare, 2015), or sea creatures, once believed to be silent were communicating all along (Jorgewich-Cohen et

al., 2022), offers inspiration on how we can recognise and, perhaps with some challenges, translate more-than-human voices.

4.2 Ursula Le Guin's therolinguistics

Peterson (2001:184), writing about Arendt, states that "[t]o be cast out of community, whether individually or as a member of a despised group, is to lose one's ability to speak for oneself and to act on one's own behalf". Marginalised voices, human and more-than, are often cast out of community, their speech not heard, their action not recognised. The challenge of extending our social conscience becomes more tangible when we recognise that all entities have their own ways of relating and expressing themselves, even when we do not acknowledge the legitimacy of their voice. The following story is a piece of speculative fabulation where animals disclose themselves, the challenge of translation is evident, and where it is considered a failure of our imagination when diverse voices do not make the cut.

Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 (2015) short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds: And Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*' is an exploration of the language of plants and animals, where "[s]cience fiction and science fact cohabit happily" (Haraway, 2016:7). In it, Le Guin explores scientists studying non-human animal languages, what she has named therolinguistics, and how they translate and interpret the world around us. The story comprises three vignettes: a journal entry of scientists translating ant language, an advertisement for an expedition to study penguin language, and an editorial by the President of the Therolinguistics Association, which seeks to challenge our commonly held axioms and ponders the possibilities of understanding the non-communicative language of plants.

Le Guin uses multiple perspectives and an epistolary format to engage the reader in a world that is familiar and unexpected. The first vignette, titled *MS. Found in an anthill* (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:295), presents notes from a pair of therolinguists' translations of messages left by an ant on degerminated acacia seeds. "There has been already considerable dispute over the interpretation … of Seed 31: … Up with the Queen!" The therolinguists "… suggest that the confusion over Seed 31 may result from an ethnocentric interpretation of the word 'up'. To us, 'up' is a 'good' direction." The correct translation can only be "Down with the Queen!" as a worker's call for rebellion since for ants "'up' is scorching sun; … exile; death." The body of a small worker ant is discovered alongside Seed 31, "the head severed from the thorax, probably by the jaws of a soldier of the colony" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:296-297).

In the second vignette, *Announcement of an Expedition*, Dr. Petri seeks colleagues to follow him on an expedition to Antarctica to study the poetry of Emperor penguins. An elusive language, "[o]nly when Professor Duby reminded us that penguins are birds, that they do not swim but *fly in water*, only then could the therolinguist begin to approach the sea literature of the penguin with understanding" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:298). Further, Dr. Petri argues that, unlike the kinetic aquatic texts of Adélie penguins, the difficult and remote dialectic of the Emperor penguin is a more promising field. "The beauty of that

poetry is as unearthly as anything we shall ever find on earth … Imagine it: the ice, the scouring snow, the darkness, the ceaseless whine and scream of the wind. In that black desolation a little band of poets crouches … starving … The poets cannot hear each other; they cannot see each other. They can only feel the other's *warmth*. That is their poetry, that is their art." Four spots remain. They leave for Antarctica on Thursday.

The final vignette is an editorial written by the President of the Therolinguist Association. The president challenges the therolinguist community to go beyond the study of animals, noting that plant languages remain largely unexplored and considers this a failure of imagination. The exploration of language, according to the president, should not be limited to the active communication of animals but must expand to include the passive arts. Language and art may not only be governed by movement and metered by time, nor solely considered communication, but also reception. They are not action, but reaction. The president challenges fellow therolinguists to be bold adventurers, looking to a future when later generations will laugh at our ignorance, "Do you realise … that they couldn't even read Eggplant?" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:302-303).

Le Guin's imaginative exploration, where ants, penguins, and eggplants disclose who they are and we do not turn away, illustrates how they have entered the space of politics. Arendt's political theory is rich with concepts that are embedded within each other. They build on each other, creating a crescendo accumulating in a space where stories shape worlds. *Storytelling* occurs in the *public realm*, the very space where politics unfolds. That *political space* is conditioned on *plurality* and *natality*. It is where one is *born again* through *action*, as it is through action and engagement with the diverse perspectives of others that new beginnings are set into motion. Storytelling emerges as the truest form of political action (Arendt 1998; Jørgensen, 2022; Tassinari et al., 2017).

4.3 Hannah Arendt's political theory

For Arendt, storytelling as political action is central to critical engagement and our capacity for an enlarged mentality. Disch (1993:665) comments that "[a] well-crafted story shares with the most elegant theories the ability to bring a version of the world to light that so transforms the way people see that it seems never to have been otherwise". Stories not only shape individual perceptions but also enable shared understanding. To tell a story is to act, and to act is to create "its own, local, momentary space" (Le Guin, 2004:199). Storytelling is an act of creation – a new beginning, or rather natality – because it allows us to reinterpret and redefine our world, making space for new perspectives and understandings. In *The Human Condition* (2018), Arendt emphasises that the essence of human action is rooted in the birth of new individuals. This birth is a fresh start and the potential for action, which can produce new and unexpected changes in the world. Every time we act, we reaffirm our birth.

According to Arendt, plurality is the existential condition of all political life (Arendt, 1998:7). Plurality includes equality and distinction – we are equal enough to understand each other, yet distinct enough to need ways to do so. Speech bridges the gap between

beings, distinguishing ourselves. It is in our distinctiveness that speech is necessary for revelation, allowing others to see more of the speaker than she might see of herself (Arendt, 1998; Peterson, 2001). However, when Arendt writes "all political life", she refers to all human life, "where nonhumans are excluded from the domain of action and appear only as passive resources to be exploited for human plans and actions" (McCullagh, 2019:142). Recalling Leopold and the land ethic to 'think like a mountain', our idea of community needs to expand beyond *Homo sapiens* to include biotic and abiotic members. McCullagh (2019) interprets Arendt's concept of the public space as relying on a separation between human and non-human activities, distinguishing the functions and activities that take place in public, private, and social realms. According to this view, only private and social realms encompass human interactions with the natural world. By excluding non-human elements from the political space, the needs of ecosystems and species, as well as their interactions with humans, are overlooked as politically insignificant.

McCullagh (2019) develops the concept of heterogenous political space as an alternative to the exclusively human political space which dominates Western political thinking about collective action and justice. Opening the political space to heterogeneity "[...] places humans within a system of nature but also brings nonhumans into focus as relevant 'subjects' of ethics and politics" (Braidotti & Bignall, 2019:10). McCullagh (2019:141) argues that "[i]n their [Deleuze and Guattari] insistence that human action cannot be separated from the productions of nature, we find that heterogeneity, rather than human plurality, is given as a condition of action". McCullagh engages Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of following and assembling, exploring micro-political registers composed of heterogeneous collectives in processes of composition. By doing so, she argues for acknowledging diverse human-non-human entanglements and recognising the different ways in which capacities for political action are constituted in various assemblages.

Researcher: You mention change. Can you expand on that a little bit more? What does change mean to a mountain? How do you experience change through rhythm?

Mountain: Continual change defines us. With us there are different cycles and rhythms: linear time, cyclical time, slow evolution, and rapid transformation. It's through the interplay of temporalities where change is life. Each sunrise and sunset bring both something familiar and unique. In the comforting songs of the coqui, now dwindling in number, we feel the ongoing rhythm of things staying the same even as they change. We've witnessed the slow erosion of rocks, the gradual growth of forests, the chaotic destruction of hurricanes and earthquakes and the deliberate scars of people. Yet amidst these becomings, there is a steady heartbeat, a constant refrain, grounding us. It's within this rhythm that change takes on meaning – it is not a disruption but a vital part of existence.

5. To love the world, think like a mountain

Who am I to speak for the Mountain? I am just a curious being with a wild imagination who wants to think differently. I am not an authority on geolinguistics, nor do I want to be. The idea of communicating with a mountain and gathering stories is an exercise in our ability to imagine otherwise. This act of envisioning a world where non-linguistic entities can communicate with humans is inherently speculative, as it requires one to think beyond the limitations of our existing capabilities and consider new possibilities. Like Le Guin's (2015 [1974]:298) therolinguists, "[...] the difficulty of translation is still with us". The process of blending storytelling with elements of reality offers a way to explore and express complex ideas, relationships, and ethical considerations from a different vantage point. This kind of speculative fabulation allows us to engage with the world in novel and transformative ways. It challenges our anthropocentric viewpoints, expands our understanding of agency and communication, and may even create a deeper connection with the non-human world.

Through stories, we find a way to translate more-than-human voices into a form that we, *Homo sapiens*, can understand and engage with, hopefully doing so in a way that honours how more-than-humans express themselves and participate in the world. Our imagination helps us reconcile what has happened with reality. "Imagination, even in its wildest flights, is not detached from reality: imagination acknowledges reality, starts from it, and returns to enrich it" (Le Guin, 2016:109). For Le Guin, fantasy is imagination, and the imagination is an experimentation on the real. A challenge to this is the argument that by translating more-than-human voices into a form that we can understand runs the risk of anthropomorphising and misrepresenting who they really are. While this is indeed true and requires thoughtful consideration, it is also a way to create empathy and understanding. The voices and stories of more-than-humans challenge anthropocentric viewpoints and help develop a deeper connection with the world around us. This imaginative exercise is not about literal accuracy but about exploring our ethical and relational frameworks.

The speculative interview has led me on a path of thinking about heterogeneity, duration, being, and becoming. By engaging in becoming-mountain through the process of thinking as becoming (Bertetto, 2017), the interview explores how we can understand the Mountain's experience and voice in a creative act of fabulation that envisions new ways of relating and knowing. Thinking as becoming can be thought of through Arendt's metaphoric suggestion to allow the imagination to go visiting. To 'visit' is just that, you use the imagination to visit the perspectives of others without fully assimilating their viewpoints or abandoning your own (Arendt, 1992; Roodt, 2005). It enlarges our mentality, it does not replace it with another one. The practice of going visiting is challenging since it demands that we be genuinely curious about others, especially those that we think we know, to ask engaging questions, and respond thoughtfully, all while being polite (Haraway, 2016:127).

As we have seen with the Mountain and the Acacia Seed, storytelling is key to opening the political space to heterogeneity and acknowledging entanglements that produce

political action. According to Haraway (2018:102), "storytelling is a thinking practice, not an embellishment to thinking". Stories are the moments when personal experiences are made public (Jackson, 2013), allowing us to confront and attend to "the complexities and movements of life" (Jørgensen, 2024:1). Storytelling is not a solitary activity, it is something we do with others and is thus a political act (Arendt, 1998). Through the telling of a story, we interact with others and appear in the public space. Thus, storytelling is not only an act of natality but also an act of intersubjective communication between speakers and listeners, creating a unique, temporary space that draws listeners into an intimate sphere (Le Guin, 2004). This creation of a shared space emphasises the concept of plurality, where multiple voices and perspectives come together.

This article started because I wanted to understand what Arendt meant when she said our existence is conditioned on plurality. How can I begin to think about myself not as the 'I in the many' but as the 'many in I'? Arendt was a situated human figure (Haraway, 2016:), and her thinking is situated in historical and secular contexts. I will take the liberty to forgive the limitations of her thinking that did not extend the political space to more-than-human voices. Her thinking was just that, limited, confined to the situatedness of her reality, but we are not Hannah Arendt, and we do not need to be restricted by her limitations. As Haraway suggests, while we should not dismiss the value of Arendt and her emphasis on thinking deeply and reflectively on our own context and actions, we do need to broaden her approach. Following Deleuze and Guattari, McCullogh (2019) argues that human action is inherently tied to nature, making heterogeneity, not just human plurality, essential for action. Storytelling is a way to understand public life from within it, emerging from different perspectives that preclude objective analysis (Disch, 1993). By acknowledging diverse human-non-human entanglements through storytelling, we can better grasp the complex, interconnected nature of political and social actions.

"It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land" (Leopold, 1949:223). Arendt argues that ethics begins with an individual's relationship to themselves, situated in a pluralistic and interdependent world (Jørgenson, 2024). This inherent responsibility is a fact of being born. Arendt emphasises that ethics are rooted in thinking, which helps individuals develop who they are and act ethically within the web of relations. When we extend this ethical thinking to include more-than-human voices, as Le Guin's storytelling and the metaphor to 'think like a mountain' exemplify, we begin to embrace heterogeneity. Embracing this diversity in the political space encourages a broader perspective that values different forms of life and their contributions, which might lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Researcher: How do you feel about me telling your story?

Mountain: Oh, emmm, well …

Researcher: It's okay. I would understand if you thought I wasn't the right person.

Mountain: It's just … we've seen your kind come and go. They come and observe, see what they want and then tell their story, not ours. In their stories we are reduced to ordinary descriptions: awe-inspiring, majestic, permanent, and stable, these are stories of what we are and what we are not; entirely overlooking who we are.

6. Conclusion

Grounded in the insights of storytellers and thinkers, becoming-mountain is one way we can think about and address the meta-crisis. To 'think like a mountain' urges us to deeply consider how our practices and structures maintain or resist social and environmental inequalities, encouraging us to recognise that we are a part of larger ecosystems rather than isolated individuals. The 'many in I' reflects an understanding that who we are is shaped by our interactions with others and the community around us. Instead of viewing ourselves as a singular, isolated entity, heterogeneity encourages embracing the multiplicity of experiences and viewpoints that contribute to who we are. In a sense, this act of thinking leads us towards 'becoming-mountain', where we embody this perspective in our actions and decisions.

In the context of organisations, we can consider the connections and impacts of our actions. Agential cuts, as Barad describes, are not just about separating entities but understanding how these separations and connections are co-constructed. When we make a cut, we make a decision about our role within a larger ecological and social system. This reflection is important because failing to recognise the often overlooked and marginalised voices reinforces inequalities. It asks us to think about who and what we consider in our decision-making processes and the broader consequences of these choices. Every decision and practice within an organisation is a story in the making (Jørgensen, 2024), and the consequences are not so easy to predict.

Opening the political space to heterogeneity is not just about recognising unheard voices but also acknowledging the material and ecological contexts they represent. It is about creating a more inclusive and reflective practice that actively seeks to understand and address the complex web of relationships we are a part of. This way, we can start to unravel the entrenched systems of inequality and move towards more equitable and sustainable futures. Addressing the meta-crisis requires a fundamental shift in how we view and interact with the world around us. To become-mountain encourages us to consider the broader ecological and social contexts that our actions influence.

Multispecies storytelling, then, is an ethical and affective practice. By listening to and incorporating the voices of more-than-humans, we start to make stories that respect and

acknowledge their existence and agency. This storytelling emphasises our entanglement and collective well-being, nurturing our ability to respond (Haraway, 2016). Ethically, it challenges anthropocentric narratives and promotes inclusive and just politics. Affectively, it has the power to inspire and connect us to the worlds we inhabit and make kin with unlikely fellows. Through the creation of stories, we can imagine and create "a new Earth" and alternative futures.

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