

Commentary from the Field

On Regenerative African Futures:

Sovereignty, Becoming Human, Death, and Forgiveness as Fertile Paradoxes for Decolonial Soul Work

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Introduction

This think piece is a sensorial grappling with slippery paradoxes within Regenerative African Futures that persist in elusive ways. It hopes to trouble conditionalities (either /or thinkings) that stagnate our ability to move into Regenerative Futures. In a world where the tendency to bifurcate is part of our programming, this piece wonders how practicing a sense of awareness around the paradoxes of sovereignty, becoming human, death, and forgiveness might help us arrive at a more radical embrace of the soul work before us. Perhaps by attending to the slippery edges of the continuum we can begin to be aware of the streams we are embroiled in, and make greater strides into praxis-based responses that do not shy from this. This piece reflects the collective work underway over the last few years for co-conspirators who have been working with and around the Environmental Learning Research Centre at Rhodes University, South Africa. It suggests that transcending these paradoxes requires a deep sense of soul-based grounding that can help us make home and sanctuary for our most expansive selves. This is critical and mutual work for awareness-based systems change. Lastly, the piece suggests that by foregrounding the soul

in the work of mutually becoming human we regenerate tender and vital spaces for our co- inquiry in ways that help us gain a kind of alchemical resilience through some of the most fragile and atrophied spaces in our inner and outer landscapes.

The poet Rilke challenges us to “take [our] practiced powers and stretch them out until they span the chasm between two contradictions” (Rilke, 1989, p. 261). This think piece is about capacitating a radical “AND” that conjoins seemingly contradictory paths. The intention is to write what feels difficult to grasp and sometimes difficult to say as a way of releasing the anxious loop it reproduces. Here, the praxis- based work of non- duality truly begins. There are no easy answers to be gained here, but rather the hope for an immersive ‘third way’ that gifts us an uncanny appreciation of how every opposite plays its part in a picture of wholeness. Alice Walker said it well and simply when she said that “you cannot curse a part without damning the whole” (Walker, 2010, p. 198). Similarly, when we emerge to bear witness to seemingly disparate parts of a system, we might get an understanding that ultimately shifts the discourse in ways that might be looming, difficult AND necessary.

The impetus to see this work as part of Regenerative African Futures acknowledges that a living decolonial project works like two wheels of a bicycle: the first wheel is the work of transgressing what no longer serves us. The second wheel ought to be the creative work needed to nourish the conditions under which something different can grow. These nourishing possibilities could emerge from digging up old archives to rediscover ourselves (Busia, 1992, p. 869). They could emerge from pulling forward the umbilical cord of our intangible cultural heritages (Mkhize, 2023). They also could emerge from deft acts of revelation that help us see how it is we are moving in the moment (Drexler-Dreis, 2015, pp. 255–256). Regardless of their source, regenerative practices need to be about “seeking a now” that can “breed new futures” (Lorde, 1997, p. 255).

Some might wonder why the focus here is on African futures? By calling forth a focus on African Futures I mean to go beyond privileging the Global South as a potent place for meaning making as sacred a point as this might be. By talking about African futures I am summoning the idea of Africa as the primordial mother of all. By doing this, I also mean to engage the African contexts in ways that can generously bless similar ongoing discourses elsewhere and so ruminating in praxis from here might hold the legacy of blessing the whole.

The related paradoxes explored in this think piece are ancient- newly- appreciated constellations of co- inquiry. By chronicling these paradoxes, I hope that we can better see, sense, and hear ourselves more acutely in this moment and hopefully experiment on these continuums through decolonial rites of our own making. In other words, I am wondering what co- constituted practices help us sit with these fertile paradoxes, without collapsing into our fragmented bifurcating muscle memory. De Sousa Santos helps us in thinking around this by stating that:

The fertility of a contradiction does not lie in imagining ways of escaping it, but rather in ways of working with and through it. If the time of paradigmatic transition has a name, it is certainly that of enabling contradictions. (Santos, 2014, p. 238)

Everywhere we look, engendering the promise of a paradigmatic transition haunts us through the social, economic, and ecological poly-crisis that are definitive of our times. May these paradoxes help us to slow down to the work within and between us and all sentient relations in ways that truly surprise us.

Four Related Paradoxes in Regenerative African Futures

On Sovereignty and the Philo-praxis of Collectively Becoming Human

Can we adequately practice Ubuntu and elevate powerful possibilities for our collective entanglements in becoming human, without also finding ways to adequately acknowledge and uncover the unique possibilities that each individual presents¹? Here the real paradox arises when we ask questions about

¹ It is tricky to try and say something succinct about what Ubuntu means for this paper without this becoming its whole focus! Please pause with me here to briefly attend to this before we move on. The trouble is ...I have a sneaky suspicion growing over time that Ubuntu as a philo-praxis of liberation refuses to be written and that attempts to try and define it over time can make the mystery and promise of its essence slip through our fingers. Generous attempts at this definition include those respectively made by Leonard Praeg (2014) and others. The closest I have gotten to unraveling this paradox comes from the work of Ndumiso Dladla whose nuanced writing implores us to understand that Ubuntu cannot be perceived as a kind of liberal humanism. I will quote his ruminations in full as an orientating foundation to what is useful for this paper:

It is precisely the understanding of be-ing Human as verbal and continual motion, always in a constant state of revision and reconfiguration that makes the translation of Ubuntu into Humanism untenable. Humanness is the accurate rendition of Ubuntu; of Human being and becoming. Thus Ubuntu may never be translated as Humanism (see Metz2007a, Cornell 2014; Praeg 2014)... the prefix “-ism” inevitably fixates and arrests from motion some or another moment or aspect of reality. The result is the creation of the dogmatic and unchangeable, the foregone and the finalised...Ubuntu as ethics is inseparably connected to the recognition that motion is the principle of being. Thus, the ethics of Ubuntu revolves around contingency and mutability...Ubuntu is both the source as well as the embodiment of the ethics of the Bantu speaking people. The implication is that being a human being is simply not given or passive. Ubuntu is simultaneously gerund and gerundive. As such it is an orientation to the practice of the philosophy of Ubuntu. It is in this sense a philo-praxis. Simply being born of the species Homo Sapiens may

what sovereignty has to do with Ubuntu. Ah! Sovereignty! A word that has been used politically to denote the forcible demarcation of territory in colonised lands... this concept sits at the heart of so much grief and loss protracted over time. But what about sovereignty as a spiritual concept? What about the possibilities it affords us in terms of the unique work of self-actualisation that is in service of the whole? And what about the aspect of will-full choice that is at the crux of this? Some useful definitions of sovereignty include being who one truly is, becoming what one can become, and being the subject of one's life and not merely the object of others' lives (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 50). This definition goes further to declare something that we are often very shy of saying:

Everybody's true nature is sovereign. We have only to recognise it, and honour it in other people—in all beings, in our children, and in ourselves. Of course, having “only to recognise it” isn't so easy. It is the work of a lifetime, if not many lifetimes. We may not know or may have lost touch with what is most fundamental in ourselves, with our own nature, with what calls to us most deeply. When we don't recognise our true nature, and live far from it, we can create a lot of suffering for ourselves and for others. (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, pp. 50–51)

It strikes me as poignant that this perspective, which I wholeheartedly believe in, is one that is so difficult to stay with in the world. The layers of cultural programming that obscure the possibilities of sovereignty are astounding. Can we adequately invoke the possibilities of Ubuntu (the philo-praxis of mutually *becoming human* from Dladla's perspective) without doing reparative work around encouraging each soul to feel safe enough to belong and become themselves as a part of belonging and becoming in community with others? Here I am sensing into the concept of sovereignty as something different to the rampant individuality that neo-liberalism idolises. I ask this earnestly in a context where 'choice' or that loaded word 'agency' (which I have become intensely weary of) is often storied as a privilege; that only some live to author their lives in ways that resemble will-full choice.

This point dare not deny that there are many writ out of Regenerative Futures because of the systemic erosion of this very sense of sovereignty. But

be a necessary condition to be a human being but it is not sufficient. One ought to become—in the ethical sense—a human being (Dladla, 2017, p. 53).

Learning and unlearning what it means to be human is a motion woven into the philo-praxis of Ubuntu. Additionally, the word 'contingency' in Dladla's quote is useful because it highlights that Ubuntu might be possible but it is ultimately unpredictable. What this means for the paper is that Ubuntu as a philo-praxis of liberation is a compelling and mysterious happening. We must always gesture towards it, but can never truly rest in its full realisation. Ubuntu holds an unrelenting sense of enactment and as such is a worthy struggle for Regenerative African Futures.

rushing to regenerate a sense of Ubuntu, without clearing the soul of the societal conditioning that predates, controls, and consumes its sovereignty does not help us to collectively reset the age we are in. Coming into the inner realms of personal sovereignty and personal autonomy—not as the future main stay of action—but as a way of strengthening our collective co-conspiracy in transgressive ways seems key here. And within this is a belief that we can indeed create new regenerative pathways that are not enslaved by the spell of modernity. Perhaps, the possibilities of our collective freedom eludes us because aspects of our sovereignty have been utterly corroded. Perhaps we struggle to bear witness to each other because we are still learning to do that work for ourselves outside of the programming of competition and scarcity. The possibility of our unity continues to evade us paradoxically because we are entrained to hustle for our own individual space rather than collectively coming to a sense of freedom that could transgress the templates of modernity. In other words: how can we become what we can become, if I cannot become what I can become? How can both be authentically held in praxis?

Faithfully Mirroring the Landscapes of Body and Land

And on that dream of the liberated soul, the sovereign soul, how can we do this reparative work without unintentionally bypassing our connection to the land as a central part of this? So much of the climate change discourse asks us to focus on what we are doing to the earth and all sentient beings. This is laudable and yet paradoxically so much of that discourse is storied as privilege in contexts where predatory socio-material conditions are so dire. Care for the environment? How, when I am hustling to make ends meet? Can we truly understand and care for what has happened to the earth without understanding and caring for what has happened to us along the way? Colonialism as a project began its experiments in domination with a desire to conquer lands. The bodies that it found on those lands were an encumbrance that were treated as equally malleable. Toni Stuart reminds us that what we do to the land we have already done to the body, and yet we continue to story the trajectories of the human being and the earth as separate and competing with each other, when what is happening to both of them faithfully mirrors each other (Stuart, 2022).

Some emphasis on building eco-literacies holds the paradox of believing we can find adequate ways to resonate with the change in the climate without truly understanding that everything that we see happening ‘out there’ has already happened to us. They emphasise the ecological work without wanting to touch the decolonial work. We have a lifetime of patterns on our bodies that echo the monocultural and predatory neo-liberal patterns we have tried to dominate the earth with. It is not the earth that needs saving... we are the one’s dying while we call it progress. Priya Vallabh takes this point home and links it with sovereignty and belonging by stating that one of the fundamental keys for the realisation of sovereignty is the re-establishment of one’s own authentic and accountable relationship with the land (Vallabh, 2021). Here the call for land in

South Africa and elsewhere holds an incredibly deep promise of regeneration that is about much more than capturing the “means of production” in capitalistic terms. It is a poignant rejoinder to regenerate our full humanity in relationship with the sacredness of the earth.

On Heartbreak, Death, and Decolonial Love

Can it ever be possible to talk about regeneration without fully embracing death as part of this process? Life- death- renewal is the pattern that all life makes. Rupi Kaur eloquently reminds us that “people too must wilt, fall, root, and rise in order to bloom (Kaur, 2017, p. 115). And yet we have been conditioned to chase the endless summer of sustainable progress working within the metronome of neo- liberalism’s rhythm. Our activism and deep frustrations with the way things are often calls us up and out in ways that rally against injustice. We arrive to resist, to persist, to push our lives against the grain of what threatens life. This pattern in our activism asks that we exert our very life force against foreclosure. The irony is not lost on me that historically and contemporarily death—literal death—is often the painful result of these actions. One can only gasp in horror at the calculated brutal assaults against life around us, and there can be great paralysis in apprehending the violence both slow and bombastic that is at play right now. The heightened nature of these polycrises create a traumatised malaise in which will-full ways of consciously responding *otherwise* are easily trivialised. It is seen as a weakness “to hold tension, in matters both large and small” because doing so seems “uncertain or indecisive” (Palmer, 2004, p. 177). More is said on this:

Standing in the tragic gap is unpopular amongst us because it contradicts the arrogance of power deeply rooted in our egos and culture...Ultimately, what drives us to resolve tension as quickly as we possibly can is the fear that if we hold it too long, it will break our hearts... And the heart’s fear of being broken is not fanciful: holding powerful tensions over time can be and often is a heart-breaking experience. (Palmer, 2004, pp. 177–178)

Might our heartbreaks constitute another kind of death that is necessary in the pursuit of regenerative futures? Can this kind of death be seen as a foundational cornerstone of the praxis of decolonial love? For great fear of disrespecting or dishonouring *sooo* many triggers that come up in my attempts to articulate this, I need to rely on a poetic interlude to help galvanise what seems at play here:

...all love must lead to death, of one kind or another. All love must lead to death. And out of this death a new man or woman is born.... Love does not lead to only one death, but to several deaths; and because of love one must keep dying and being reborn, from time to time... love only dies only when you resist another death which love brings upon you, in order that you be reborn, and grow.

That is why there are few real loves in the world, because people fear yet another death that they must endure. They count the deaths and rebirths they have undergone and say- so many and no more, so far but no further; I will not die again for you, but I intend to stay here where I am, how I am now, and here in this fixed place. I intend to build the castle of myself on this rock. (Okri, 2007, p. 267)

What deaths are being asked of us in order to rebirth the possibility of decolonial love in the world? And can we abide with the reality that these deaths are not something we can ask of any 'other,' that there is no one 'out there' we can force to do this—that these other kinds of deaths are intimate initiations we surrender to by ourselves, for ourselves often alone and out of the view of public discourse? And in the face of the tangible terror perceived in the outside world, can we dare to believe that these intimate regenerative deaths actually matter? This is a paradox in what might constitute the process of systemic change. And for those who dare to go deep into these forays how can we better recognise each other and anchor the strange ambit of our praxis?

Reinscribing the Dreaded Work of Forgiveness

Related to need for another kind of death, might forgiveness be a death of some kind? And how do we approach this otherwise when the historical narrative has taught us to be disdainful and distrusting of the results of forgiveness. We are often taught that it can be a weakness that betrays what is at stake. Take for example the contradiction of how Mandela's mythical legacy is universally praised, but also locally derided as the harbinger of the sinking pitfalls of contemporary South Africa. Anaemic forgiveness without adequate intergeneration restitution is what continues to plague the prospects of peace in South Africa. Insights into this quandary are clearly set out:

Yes, the past did happen—where we lost our lands and resources, but we were told to forgive, and we did. However, we still had concerns about the things we lost and how we were going to get them back... We have forgiven but we don't know how to move forward: whether to forget everything and move on with our lives, or before we move on let's have a talk on how we will be compensated for things our grandfathers lost due to the system at the time. We have forgiven but we didn't forget (Swartz, 2016, p. 187).

When we think about the current state of the nation as the fruits of forgiveness without restitution, it leaves very little room to breathe into the discourse of forgiveness as something that could serve to bring us home to ourselves and each other. It is also really important to note that often when we think about forgiveness on these terms, it is those who are most aggrieved, those who have been 'perpetrated' that are often asked to do the work of forgiveness.

What often falls out of view is the mutually constituted collective that *all* have had some part to play in. Sharlene Swartz’s work on “Everyday Restitution” expands our understanding of Hillberg’s victim oppressor saviour triangle that we have become accustomed to, by producing a pentangle that exceeds the roles we usually ascribe to the drama triangle:

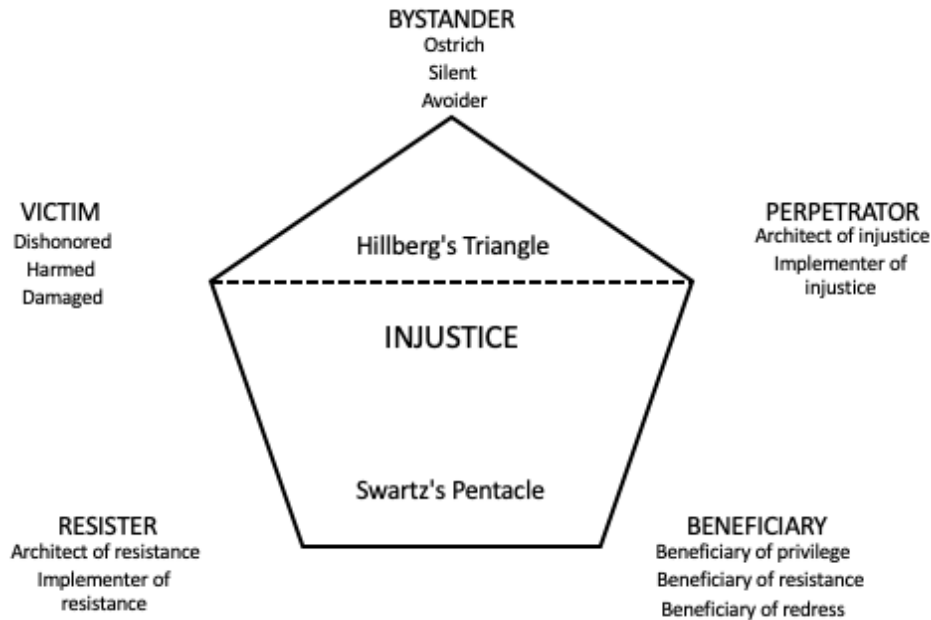


Figure 1: Swartz Pentacle of Restitution from (Swartz, 2016, p. 178).

By extending the list of actors in this way Swartz’s work allows more people to relate and locate themselves in the past, while also inviting them to take responsibility for the dehumanising actions of others. This is a moral obligation to show up and contribute to the rehumanisation of everyone, including themselves (Swartz, 2016, p.187). There is a greater mutuality reinscribed in her offering. This pentangle gives us more ropes to hold on to that are symbolic of the tension between us. More actors are called to come off their particular “rocks” and do the work of restituting the whole—by mutually becoming human together. Can any of these actors (and many more that must exist in the fray) begin to truly create something new without the alchemical work of forgiveness? It seems to me that forgiveness within this perspective widens it up beyond the labour that those most dishonoured, harmed, and “damaged” so to speak, can offer (Swartz, 2016, p. 187). And after all aren’t we all “damaged” by that which harms a part of the system? There is alchemical work that all actors in the field have to do, in order to re-enter into communal rehumanising. Forgiveness here could be seen as the release of pent-up energy held in whatever dynamic or archetypal part that one is caught up in. Forgiveness could be the decision to forgo that which continually closes up options for the future for all—it could be part of the critical sites for the learning and unlearning of our programming. And going beyond the South African context like the heart-breaking violence in

Palestine and Israel where we see old dynamics being painfully fortified, what is forgiveness as a transgressive act? And what needs to die in us for forgiveness to do its work? Valerie Kaur leads us in a demonstration of an inner dialogue that leads us to the shorelines of what forgiveness means for her:

I do not owe my opponents my affection, warmth or regard. But I do owe myself a chance to live in this world without the burden of hate. "I shall permit no man, no matter what his colour might be, to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him." Said Booker T. Washington. It reminds me of a line from Toni Morrison's novel *Love*: "Hate does that. It burns off everything but itself, so whatever your grievance is, your face looks just like your enemy's." I refuse to let anyone belittle my soul, or diminish my own expansive sense of self. The more I listen, the less I hate. The less I hate, the more I am free to choose actions that are controlled not by animosity but by wisdom. Labouring to love my opponents is how I love myself. This is not the stuff of saintliness. This is our birth right. (Kaur, 2020, p. 140)

Here she is struggling to become more of herself in the face of that which threatens to contract the expansion of her soul. I would hope that we could have similar intimate reflections on the great systemic burdens of apathy, ignorance, isolation, and protectionism that also form parts of extremely polarised dynamics, for they too are a weight on the human psyche, and contraction of the soul whether greatly acknowledged or not. Adequately facing these burdens within and between ourselves is also part of the necessary heartbreaks we must endure in becoming human.

Mutually ‘Surfacing to Soul’²: Regenerative African Futures in Motion



Figure 2: *Lighting the Inner Flame* by Injairu Kulundu-Bolus

All of these related paradoxes circumscribe an underlying belief in something that forgoes the meaning-making we have been taught to value. To approach these paradoxes is to surrender to another set of principles in life that ultimately believe that the *intangible* spirit of our efforts matters and can indeed influence our tangible view of material reality. Schumacher gives us a glimpse of what this kind of belief entails:

Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled...Countless mothers and teachers, in fact do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended—the power of love (Schumacher as cited in Palmer, 2004, p. 179).

This work is the domain of love and the domain of the soul. More is said on the insurmountable works of the soul:

The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is wise: it suffers without shutting down. The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep opening our hearts. The soul

² The words “surface to soul” are indebted to the prolific words of Sez Kristiansen in (Kristiansen, 2023).

is creative: it finds a path between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere escapes. All we need to do is bring down the wall that separates us from our own souls and deprives the worlds of the soul's regenerative powers. (Palmer, 2004, p. 184)

How can we bring more reverence to the work of the soul as we apprehend the trickiest questions of our times? How might these practices constitute a kind of *alchemical resilience* in collectively becoming human? This requires that we continue to honour a vision of this being possible *exactly* when the pain of the world threatens to make us contract into ourselves in a resigned and diminished sense of self. Perhaps, as Okri suggests “our capacity for change can only be as great as our understanding of our spiritual patrimony” (Okri, 2023, p. 69). Decolonial soul work holds reverence for a nameless and expansive spiritual patrimony as a wise and deep resource for what we can be and become together. I believe that awareness-based work has always in some ways implied taking the time to pause, reflect, sense, and listen in creative ways. These gestures held in suspension are part of re-leasing the work of the soul in system-based change. This think piece advances the sensibility that resting our conspirations in these tender spaces matters greatly in creating the forays of what is possible. May we “surface to soul” in ways that can create a future worthy of our longing (Kristiansen, 2023). And may we find ourselves and each other as we do so.

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