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## Embodying Ubuntu, Through the Physical Journal as an Antidote to the Effects of the Anthropocene

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This Article will explore, how embodying an interpretation of the South African concept of Ubuntu, through a praxis via my concept of the Physical Journal, can become an antidote to the alienating effects of the Anthropocene. The current effects of the Anthropocene, are underpinned by the ideology of liberal capitalism; which has been accelerating its economic indifference to the Eco-scene since the enlightenment. This much heralded period in the 18th century, saw people with my Yoruba cultural heritage, as commodities to be bought and sold. Thus, I would have been seen, at the time of the enlightenment, as a resource to be exploited along with the environment and livestock. As a consumable resource, I would not have been considered as having any rights to the lofty claims proposed by the enlightenment philosophers of equality and more specifically: life, liberty, and property.

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## **Africans and the Environment as a Resource**

This Article will explore, how embodying an interpretation of the South African concept of Ubuntu, through a praxis via my concept of the Physical Journal (Taiwo: 2009), can become an antidote to the alienating effects of the Anthropocene. As I have articulated in a previous publication, the Physical Journal is a holographic projection of our embodied knowledge and memory.

The proposed concepts under pinned by my embodied memories are from lived experiences informed by movements derived from my body in its process of change. These memories neurologically construct a kind of virtual body, which is holographically projected as spatialized memory, helping my living body to write and rewrite itself. (Taiwo: 2009, 103)

The current effects of the Anthropocene, are underpinned by the ideology of liberal capitalism; which has been accelerating its economic indifference to the Eco-scene since the enlightenment. This much heralded period in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, saw people with my Yoruba cultural heritage, as commodities to be bought and sold. Thus, I would have been seen, at the time of the enlightenment, as a resource to be exploited along with the environment and livestock. As a consumable resource, I would not have been considered as having any rights to the lofty claims proposed by the enlightenment philosophers of equality and more specifically: life, liberty, and property in Europe and the Americas.

The prevailing perspective at the time of the enlightenment was exemplified by Hegel who at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, referred to Africa as 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night' (Hegel: 1956, 91). The romantic view of an African was symbolized by Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban and his relationship to Prospero, as articulated by Hegel's when he says that an African man is a, 'natural man in his completely wild and untamed state' (Hegel: 1956, 93). The point here is that because of the perceived natural and untamed state afforded to the African man and woman, this gave the European's concept of enlightenment the permission to, progress and to pursue manifest destiny; having unfettered access to expand their version of the Anthropocene. This allowed them to treat Africans the way they treat the environment as a resource for exploitation and profit. Of course we Africans are not a resource for other human beings to exploit and we traditionally do not use the environment as indifferent material to abuse. The environment and the animals are our relatives. We see ourselves as living in an intricate

network of living relationships that operate to seek balance. This is exemplified by the ancient Egyptian concept of Maat the goddess of truth, balance and justice. As well as the Zulu concept of Ubuntu, defined by the African philosopher, J. S. Mbiti's when he articulates and says, 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am' (Letseka: 2012). Ubuntu, is a consequence of an ancient communal relationship between humanity and the environment in Africa that is expressed through humanistic principles. These principles are rapidly being eliminated in today's individualistic society in our post-colonial era. Eventually, the decline of Ubuntu will be connected to the dominance of capitalism's toxic extremes; facilitated by an economic system that alienates and distorts the relationship among humans, as well as between humans and nature. Temitope Fagunwa's article, *Ubuntu: Revisiting an Endangered African Philosophy in Quest of a Pan-Africanist Revolutionary Ideology*, clearly articulates a Pan-African point of view when he states that;

Ubuntu must be reassessed as a potential social force for resistance that can pave the way for the emergence of a scientific socialist African society. (Fagunwa: 2019, 01)

suggesting that we need to focus on post-traditional concepts as well as post-colonial ones. Inviting us to reevaluate our relationship to individuals and communities around the globe. Investing in the wisdom of the past by reconnecting to the living web of life that is the Gaia consciousness. Fagunwa says that;

The fundamental notion behind Ubuntu is the core belief that our existence lies in the collective existence of humanity. (Fagunwa: 2019, 03)

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some important facts about humanity. It has highlighted the importance regarding the need for communal activity. It has shown us that we are hyper-connected in terms of transport and digital communication. At the height of the lockdown, we witnessed clear skies, as well as the music of nature, reclaiming our city streets reminding us that our current relationship to the environment is unsustainable and detrimental to our long-term survival.

### **Organic Kimospheres**

To understand the premise of Ubuntu, we have to redefine how we conceptualize the nature of 'we'; to re think how we engage with our sensorium and exercise our ecological common sense, to consider the environment as a relative and ancestor with shared DNA. We have to consider, the liminal acts as defined by Sue Broadhurst, as digitized

and organic potential spaces, where we can experience the kinetic atmospheres of nature; a kind of organic ‘Kimospheres’. Johannes Birringer’s concept of a Kimosphere is significant here, as it suggests an integrated temporal space and living architecture that is networked, tracking live human motion with audio–feedback systems. Johannes Birringer explains,

“Kimospheres” are kinetic atmospheres currently explored in installations and performances built by DAP-Lab and associates during research on wearable space for the European “Metabody” project. These kimospheres behave as if they are active living architectural organisms that have an auditory, visual, and tactile sensory quality, with subtly changing states and affordances. They can be worn and breathed, felt and imagined, transported and taken off. Elements and objects from environment can be passed and shared, some of them emit intimate sounds, they are tactile sonic emanations from the environment. They vibrate in the light of distant voices. Others are constructed as costumes/garments that inspire movement and new forms of proprioception and kinaesthetic awareness relating to the environment and others. (Birringer: 2021, 01)

The concept of a Kimosphere, postulates a kinetic atmosphere as a simulation in an installation, pointing towards an organic process that exists in Jungles and forests, in the oceans and in the skies, as ‘they vibrate in the light of distant voices’ (Birringer: 2021). Inhabitants within the metropolis have become desensitized to the subtle information that is present in an organic kimosphere. We see this in the dilemma humanity currently faces, with issues concerning our current climate crisis versus the executive directors of large social media companies like Facebook and Google whose ambitions lie in a metaverse; while companies like Amazon and SpaceX’s ambitions lie within the universe of our solar system.

### **A New Paradigm: The Metaverse**

How can we define a Metaverse and Its Potential? A Metaverse is a parallel, 3D fictional and social universe that is directly connected to our physical reality. It is similar to Baudrillard’s 3D map that is an open ended simulation; which eventually destroys the real, with the highly rendered simulation serving as an alternative universe that we can access virtually. There was a popular attempt to render Baudrillard’s 3-D map in the film *the Matrix*, but the idea was rather superficially explicated. The symbiosis between a virtual parallel 3D universe and our actual physically sensed universe, is what is termed



**Figure 1:** Lock Weatherwax in Second Life. Picture by Olu Taiwo taken in second Life.

a metaverse. A metaverse then, can be seen as a kimospheric online integrated platform, where the avatars of different users can participate in a virtual Community. This is similar to my Avatar, *Lock Weatherwax* pictured here on the left, in a virtual London city situated in Second Life.

The potential themes of

a metaverse are explored in Spielberg's film 'Ready Player One', as well as the already mentioned film 'The Matrix'. The metaverse has also been explored in films like: Tron, Terminator, Minority Report, Inception, Avatar to name but a few.

Mark Zuckerberg, The CEO of Facebook, is facing allegations that his algorithms on Facebook are actively encouraging extreme behavior in an attempt to keep people engaged in the social media platform, therefore maximizing the sale of users information and exposure to online advertising. He appears to be indifferent to the destabilizing effects Facebook has had, on society and nation states around the world. One wonders, if left unchecked, what his new company 'Meta' will do and what impact will it have on the social fabric of the planet. Social media platforms only became a reality with the rise of the internet. Access to the expansion of dimensional content became a reality and started with the Advent of Facebook's 3G, text-based, capacity. Next was the rise of 4G, which facilitated the use of better quality 2D pictures and mini videos' that exploded the use of Instagram and YouTube. Mark Zuckerberg anticipated the future value of the metaverse, or the 3D parallel virtual world years ago. This prompted him, in 2014, to buy the VR company Oculus, which will no doubt play a central role in the access of his Metaverse. Mark Zuckerberg thinks they can create a more complex social media platform that utilizes the emergent properties concerning the Internet of things, along with the rising capacities of 5G. In a post-pandemic world, this new paradigm shift, may have brought the reality of a metaverse much closer. The introduction of 4G was not just responsible for ushering faster internet speeds, it created the context and environment for new business possibilities. This includes our familiar favorites like:

YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Netflix and Zoom to name but a few. As we move towards the ubiquitous use of 5G, this capacity will not only bring faster internet speed, but will facilitate the creation of new 3-D and 4-D programs providing unique opportunities for all avatars to engage with within an integrated metaverse.

### **Animism: An Integrated Network of Bonds**

Several centuries after Descartes proposed the dual notion of an extended world as separate from the non-extended world of the psyche, we are still searching for a separate 'mechanisms' inside the brain in order to explain how we function as extended (body) and non-extended (mind) beings. Whereas, the context of Ubuntu considers the brain as an emergent property of our existential consciousness, experienced as a result of our lived and living environment. The concept and philosophy of Ubuntu invites us to interrogate the nature of embodiment, by redefining what we mean by the concept of 'we' to include other species of life and environment. As a result, thinking and feeling, becomes instinctively holistic and ecological. This is underpinned by the philosophical principles of animism as a rational philosophical concept and not as a religious one; which, assumes that all phenomena is imbued with a proto-consciousness eloquently coined by Alfred Whitehead's term 'prehension'. The concept of 'we', then includes the large community of vegetation and wildlife tailored to specific climates with people, objects and events forming a network of bonds constituting a rhizomic performative biome; an organic kimosphere. The concept of 'we' includes all manifest and virtual phenomena within the organic kimosphere of the Earth. From this network of bonds, we develop an intuitive intelligence that draws particular attention to a mode of rhythmic perception, which is both aware of itself as a whole, with individual parts and simultaneously aware of itself as a part of the whole environment. There is a desperate need to develop our sensorium in order to be sensitized to certain shared experiences in the Biome. This is what I mean by thinking and feeling holistically as well as ecologically. The concept of a holon is crucial here, as our lived, living and future bodies with their attendant physical journals, are both part of a whole and a whole with parts. Although it is an effective tool for analysis, the danger of treating the body as a mechanism, is that we imagine we have individual parts that make up a whole. We conceive of the body consisting of a number of bones, organs, muscle, ligaments and tendons not to talk about the cardiovascular, endocrine and nervous systems. We are told that we have over 600 muscles whereas our experience is that we have one muscle with over 600 parts each relating to the whole. We have one system with many modules. As a percipient, there is a need to develop an embodied understanding concerning the perceptions of flow and how it influences the lived bodies of users. A large part of what



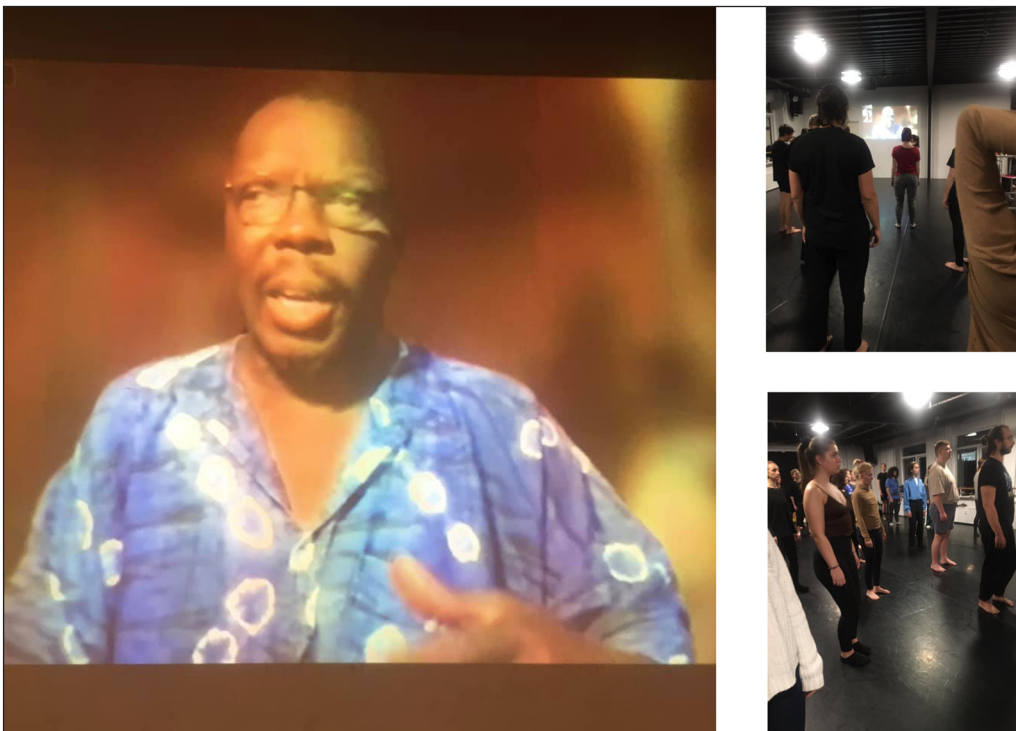
is missing with regards to the embodiment process of embodying a flow of actions, is at the performative level of shared experience, which augments and situates embodiment processes. Ideally, as practitioners, we need to reclaim a level of creative knowing, being and doing, by meta-designing relationships; which, facilitates actions that are reciprocal, oscillating between ourselves and nature's processes; which, as a result will better attune our instincts to the environment that sustains us.

### **Including the narrative in our Physical Journals**

Paradigms govern our assumptions and underpin our embodiment processes and durational experience of collective flow. As a result, we have to temporarily leave the western scientific paradigm behind, at this point, to pursue a different rational narrative. I would like to propose a definition concerning the concept of 'we'; which, is much more expansive and depends on the nested frames of reference. Symbolically like Russian dolls, there are layers. 'We' as a definition, includes the environment as family, as well as people outside our immediate sphere of experience and at its most subtle, it includes the cosmos, the cyclical motion of the planetary bodies. Ubuntu is a gateway concept, which according to the everyday use of the term, in the southern regions of Africa, means that an individual is defined by their community. Embodiment needs to become less focused on the contents and function of the 'brain' and more focused on being embodied as a network in the world; while, including more self-inclusive observations in their praxis, that is contemplating one's own knowledge equity as well as any blind spot based on cultural ignorance. Knowledge equity as an emancipatory policy framework that broadens the understanding of what (and where) knowledge is available and is a crucial concept for collecting useful information. I will now articulate my heritage, in this spirit of self-inclusion, I am a black British man, of Yoruba extraction. More specifically my tribal ethnicity is Ijebu. My ancestors migrated from the east and settled in West Africa. There are narratives and discourses that have emerged from the hotbed of civilization in and around Nubia; in pre-dynastic Egypt. Kemet, the land of the black people, was already a conglomerate of different tribal groups. As different African groups migrated towards the Nile after the desertification of the Sahara around 5000 BC, the culture of Kemet emerged all along the Nile. It is interesting to note that the classical period of Greece was around 500 BC. A little more than 200 years earlier, Egypt was ruled by the Nubians as the 25th dynasty of the Kushites. At that time Egypt experienced a renaissance; a return to what they saw as their original culture of Kemet. The link between the Yoruba and ancient Egypt/Kemet is still controversial; however, there are striking resemblances between ancient Kemet and the Yoruba languages.

## Conclusion

I conclude by explicating an experience on October 23, 2021, where I conducted a 2hr online workshop at CISPA – Copenhagen International School of Performing Arts, virtually via zoom. The Conference at an International Conference called *The Makings of the Actor: Embodiment in Acting Practice* Organized by Dr Kiki Selioni Post-doc Researcher Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Artistic director of *The Makings of the Actor*, CISPA, Labanarium, and hosted by CISPA. The workshop was on my praxis of *Urban Butoh as animal Spirit Dancing*. It was interesting to deliver a distributed experience with students in a studio and Zoom participant from around the world from the comfort of my own home, presumably within a upcoming metaverse this will be made easier. I facilitated a deeply personal journey, through their physical journals, to embody an animal from the landscape of their imaginations. It was a strangely disembodied and embodied experience, one which countless academics up and down the country have experience during lockdown. We looked at elements of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, physical theatre, guided visualization and Butoh to facilitate, in the actor's sensorium, an understanding of improvisation as means to develop physically, a way to manifest psychophysical processes as well as constructing body-based character development. See below



**Figures 2, 3, 4:** Pictures by Kiki Selioni taken in CISPA of Dr Olu Taiwo conducting an online workshop on my praxis of *Urban Butoh as animal Spirit Dancing*.



We started with the focus of presence, from the perspective of their embodied physical journal. The concept of the physical journal is distinct from the idea of the ‘The embodied self,’ by Merleau-Ponty; as his idea of the ‘lived body’ which he believed to be an important part of what makes up the subjective self, has the concept of the ‘lived body’ being the body in the past tense embodied in the present as perceptual experience. So our sensorium oscillates between the present and the past. Ron McClamrock articulates this distinction

For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experience is a distinctive phenomenon that should not be mistaken for raw sensation; unlike sensation, perceptual experience is given to us as structured, a unified whole, and as about things in the world. But neither should it be seen as our judgments about the world; how we see things isn’t the same as and how we take them to be. (McClamrock: 2020, 01)

By embodying the concept of Ubuntu, we can reawaken perceptual experiences in our physical journal and reconnect with the living web of life responding to what is important by listening to the whole. This may enable us to reverse the destructive path we are on and set a new context for an antidote for the effects of our current trajectory regarding the this Westernized Anthropocene.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### Author Information

**Olu Taiwo** is a senior lecturer in Physical theatre, Acting and Movement at the University of Winchester. He has a background in Fine art, Street performance art, African percussion and various martial arts. He has performed nationally and internationally in performances and lecture demonstrations promoting concepts surrounding practice as research, including how practice explores relationships between 'effort', and 'performative actions'. He recently had a retrospective of his work in 2020 as part of Wiltshire creatives 'Artist of the week' series. <https://www.wiltshirecreative.co.uk/whats-on/wiltshire-creative-connects/olu/#:~:text=Our%20next%20artist%20of%20the,uan%20and%20Animal%20spirit%20movement>.

He investigates performatively how as 'individuals' we interface with the increasing digital complexity with regards to our experience in twenty-first century society through his technique has been developing called 'Urban Butoh'; which, he developed as part of my performative involvement in Johannes Birringer's Dap-lab project, Ukiyo. He is Director of Transcultural studied at the institute 'the Making of the Actor' based in Athens. His publications range from, *The Return Beat* in Wood (Ed.): *The Virtual Embodied*. Routledge (1998). *Music, Art and Movement among the Yoruba*: in Harvey (Ed.): *Indigenous Religions* Cassell (2000), *Art as Eudaimonia: Embodied identities and the Return beat* in Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (ed.), *Identity, performance and technology: practices of empowerment, embodiment and technicity*. Palgrave Macmillan (2012), *The Return Beat - Interfacing with Our Interface, A Spiritual Approach to the Golden Triangle*: Peter Lang (2021).

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