Ubuntu storytelling is about engaging our relational selves. This is why my people the Ngoni say, “The story of one cannot be told without unfolding the story of many.” This means that the diverse and sometimes contradictory analysis of the same story is welcomed as long as it is exercised responsibly. If we relate to each other through storytelling then our Ubuntu storytelling is a research method. In this paper I share why and how using Ubuntu stories as methodology is an effective way to encourage Indigenous Ubuntu scholars to think about the endemic tools that make their scholarship accessible to our larger Black communities. The Ubuntu have always used the art of oral storytelling to extol the power of experience as a teaching tool because a story can allow a culture to regenerate itself. As a Maseko Ngoni, I highlight how we use Ubuntu storytelling to produce knowledge, by addressing the following themes: What Ubuntu storytelling is; why I use Ubuntu storytelling and how I address the challenges of using Ubuntu storytelling in a colonial context. I end with an example of an Ubuntu story.

Story as research methodology

Storytelling takes place mainly in the evening around the fire, after the day’s work. Most of the story teachings I have were given to me around a fireplace. While warming myself with the fire I heard about olden times, colonial times—and now I must create a new fire in a new place as my Baba did before me. I must teach my children how to draw from our past on their way forward.

As I reflect back on this fire place, I understand that knowledge is the codified essence of experience after communal discourse about its meaning within a specific worldview while using specific language symbolism. Stuart Hall (1997) clearly communicated that the continual process of knowledge making, philosophizing and encoding into memory is one of the important acts of living as a human being. This said,
I would be a liar if I told you that Indigenous Ubuntu knowledge production and governance has no oppressive or marginalizing practices, because it does. George Dei (2000) tells us: “Indigenous” signals the power relations and dynamics embedded in the production, interrogation and validation of such knowledges. It also recognizes the multiple and collective origins as well as collaborative dimensions of knowledge and affirms that the interpretation or analysis of social reality is subject to differing and sometimes oppositional perspectives. (p. 114)

For example, look at how we have treated our relatives the San people and the Khoikhoi people: We have oppressed and marginalized them over mineral resources. Here we can use our Ubuntu philosophy to challenge and create awareness about our own oppressing colonial behaviours. Using Ubuntu we can see the colonizer within us. Ubuntu structures can challenge our honesty, because they are a reflection of us and we have a duty to make sure Ubuntu reflects our reality. Where Ubuntu fails to reflect our lived reality it is our duty to come together and create a solution. This is responsible democratic participation. No people can give another people democracy and freedom. These things are achieved through a process of self-driven action and self reflection about our future aspirations.

I would like to begin by invoking my ancestors:

To talk about Our Ubuntu sacred knowledge, I require your guidance, ancestors.
Maseko Ngoni ancestors, both known and unknown to me,
Hear my plea for guidance in honouring the truth of our ways.
Amai, (mother) and Baba (father)
I fear we cannot see each other due to the rubble caused by the colonial carnage
From the spirit world I know you see all.
I am your son.
Let us begin here.
As I hold both your hands
Let us very carefully unfold those stories that we can.

As Black people have moved across the globe, either willfully or forcibly through slavery and colonialism, we have had to determine which of our traditional Indigenous knowledge would serve us best while creating new knowledge to address new realities. The methods I use have been regenerated from remembered fragments of Indigenous Black knowledge, Ubuntu. In reference to the meaning of Indigenous knowledge production, George Dei (2000) has this to say: It is a worldview that shapes the community’s relationships with surrounding environments. It is the product of the direct experience of nature and its relationship with the social world. It is knowledge that is crucial for the survival of society. It is knowledge that is based on cognitive understandings and interpretations of the social, physical and spiritual worlds. It includes concepts, beliefs and...
perceptions, and experiences of local peoples and their natural and human-built environments. (p. 114)

To make sure we share the same meanings, I start by defining what Ubuntu is. To do this I give you a two-part answer, as taught to me by our Ubuntu communities. In my first definition I communicate that Ubuntu is Blackness, and in my second I convey that Ubuntu is a philosophical African worldview. Having defined the parameter of Ubuntu, I convey why we need to keep producing Ubuntu knowledge. I end the paper with an example of how Ubuntu storytelling can help us as Black people engage in an honest way, beyond colonialism. Ubuntu storytelling is about engaging our relational selves. To know our relational selves is to be curious about our interconnectedness. Our Ubuntu worldview expresses this as: “I am because you are.”

First definition of Ubuntu

Among the amaZulu of South Africa, people are referred to as Ubuntu and a person as Muntu. Among the maShona people of Zimbabwe, a person is called Munhu and people are Vanhu. The Chichewa people of Malawi refer to a person as Munthu and people as Watu. I highlight these examples as a way of showing that Indigenous Black people have been self-identifying as Ubuntu since time immemorial, while also being aware of its quality of connecting humanity. The Zulu high priest Credo Vusa’mazulu Mutwa (1969) truthfully highlights Ubuntu to mean humanity when he tells us that:

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

Mutwa also informs us that the contraction “ntu” in Ubuntu or Muntu has its roots in the word “ntu-tu-ut’, which is an onomatopoeic word to describe the steps of a creature walking on two legs instead of four legs” (1969, p. 19).

In my 2006 master’s thesis, I address our Ubuntu roots in a chapter entitled “Origins of Our Ancestors.” In an effort to clearly show how Ubuntu history is Black history I will revisit some of the points I made and add new information.

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

The term Bantu was first coined by Dr. Wilhelm Bleek in a book published in 1862 entitled A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages. Bleek observed that nearly every language spoken on the southern third of the African continent used prefixes, which could be attributed to a set of what he called “proto-prefixes”, presuming a generic relationship and implying an aboriginal source. (p. 57)
I state forcefully that Bleek did not make a new discovery, he simply reported the knowledge our ancestors had shared with him. White settler society with its kith and kin has made claims of discovery since their first contact with Indigenous peoples, and they continue to do so at our expense. They have taken up our knowledge as their own, and have been so effective that even I found myself trying to censor my Baba’s teaching because I feared that if his teaching contradicted their writings I would be considered a revisionist. White settler society has created the illusion that it is impossible for us to talk to each other without first talking to them. From the context of Ngoni and Shona culture this knowledge is known as Ubuntu, and it is from this location of Indigenous knowledge production that I engage our diverse Blackness using narrative stories. Yet not all Black people identify as Ubuntu. The term Ubuntu has a linguistic history among a specific Black Indigenous people in Africa. Ubuntu is a philosophical theory that guides our action in order to maintain the relational bonds within our Ubuntu worldview. Ideas and philosophies created in one language cannot always be translated into another language without losing some meaning, because each language speaks to a specific contextually created knowledge.

Knowing these language translational limitations, I offer the following Ubuntu philosophical principles taught to me by my family and community: (a) I am a reflection of the existence of my ancestors. I exist because they exist, or, as we say, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngubuntu” (a person is a person through other people), or we could also say, “A thing is a thing through other things.” This means that all things know each other in relationship to each other; (b) We come from the energy flux and are the energy flux. This is why the circle is important to the Ubuntu spirituality. The circle shows that we are one; (c) We respect and give thanks for all of our relations because all elements are part of the energy flux that makes up life; (d) We try to live Ubuntu life with the aim of finding integrity and wholeness in the balance of nature which is to see the energy flux in everything; (e) To each person, place, animal or object we ask for permission before taking and give thanks for that which we have received. These prayers are directed to the spirit of the desired object. These prayers explain our actions and give justification for our actions because we respect the spirit of all things; (f) Birth and death reflect the life cycle in all things and in all places; (g) The spirit of the land and the spirit of the water we honour in special ways. In fact, it is said that the experience we have with specific elements helps us to develop language and knowledge as an effort to respect the space we occupy; (h) Our traditional governance institutions are inclusive of nature as a decision-making, relational member of Ubuntu. We honour the
intelligibility of nature; and (i) We honour the dead because they live in a parallel world to that of the living.

Let us engage our own Ubuntu structures and open up our Black relational interconnectedness. Let us not allow colonialism and neo-colonialism to fragment us any further. Ben Okri (1997) informs us that:

> Our lives have become narrow enough. Our dreams strain to widen them, to bring to our waking conscious the awareness of greater discoveries that lie just beyond the limits of our sights. (p. 4).

The narrowing of Blackness inevitably narrows what humanity is, and this is the opposite of my aim. Yet modern-day trends of academic discourse label individual historical remembering as navel gazing, and in so doing the experience of the individual, especially the colonized individual, has been rendered unreliable (Okri, 1997). In other words, the individual memory is not worth listening to because there is too much mystery in it. So, who do we listen to?

The politics of state society have determined who we need to listen to. Okri says this about who has been sanctioned to speak:

> The acknowledged legislators of the world take the world as given. They dislike mysteries, for mysteries cannot be coded, or legislated, and wonder cannot be made into law. And so these legislators police the accepted frontiers of things. Politicians, heads of state, kings, religious leaders, soldiers, the rich, the powerful [the scholars in high academics]—they all fancy themselves the masters of this earthly kingdom. They speak to us of facts, policies, statistics, programmes, abstract and severe moralities. But the dreams of the people are beyond them, and would trouble them (1997, p. 4).

I do not legislate to anyone how to live. I share only my experience and remembered, fragmented knowledge, in the hope of educating our children to love their Blackness because it is a source of great power. Black anti-colonial work has shown that the power of our Black knowledge is the cause of our being silenced, dislocated, disconnected and erased from our own history (Césaire, 1950; Okri, 1997).

**Why produce Ubuntu Indigenous knowledge?**

In an effort to dispossess us of our Black knowledge, compulsory able-bodied Whiteness has endeavoured to make our Black minds turn against themselves by creating doubt about the existence of Blackness as a powerful force. Consider for a minute the implication of Jared Diamond’s (1997) Pulitzer Prize winning book entitled *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*. Jared Diamond in his prologue states:

> Authors are regularly asked by journalists to summarize a long book in one sentence. For this book, here is such a sentence: “History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples’ environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves.”

Yet he abandons this position when Black knowledge proves to be too powerful and contradicts this theory. In chapter 19 (p. 376), he starts to play the biology game—the same game he said in his prologue was not a viable explanation for the difference among people. In this chapter he tries to discredit Black knowledge while at the same time appropriating it as anything but Black knowledge. In the case of Black Africa he makes biology his foundation position for explaining Blackness. This is the kind of attack directed towards Blackness.

Malidoma Patrice Somâe (1994) reminds us that due to slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism
and the marking of our bodies as inferior beings, some of us have had to forget the power of our Blackness as a way to survive. On the other hand, some of us have had to remember our Blackness and our spiritual past as a way to survive as well. To those Black people who have remembered our African ways, I hope my work on using Ubuntu storytelling will encourage you to keep educating the segments of our Black communities that have forgotten our Blackness as a means of survival. To Black people who have had to forget, suppress and hide their Blackness in order to survive, I hope my primer, “Many millet granaries ago” conveys that we are still here, still strong and still remember who we are, even if only in fragments. If we share our fragmented stories, we get a fuller and richer picture of our Black knowledges, which helps us understand who we are. The Ubuntu have always used the art of oral storytelling to extol the power of experience as a teaching tool. I can use no better teaching tool, as this land mass called Africa is the first story and, Okri (1997) assures us:

Africa breathes stories. In Africa everything is a story, everything is a repository of stories. Spiders, the wind, a leaf, a tree, the moon, silence, a glance, a mysterious old man, an owl at midnight, a sign, a white stone on a branch, a single yellow bird of omen, an inexplicable death, an unprompted laughter, an egg by the river, are all impregnated with stories. In Africa things are stories, they store stories, and they yield stories at the right moment of dreaming, when we are open to the secret side of objects and moods. (p. 115)

Here I quote Okri’s narration of stories in an effort to explicate that stories enable the encoding of our embodied forms of knowing and learning, as expressed by Stuart Hall (1997). To me, an Ubuntu, orature is a functional and viable teaching and (re)-search approach that one ignores at one’s peril. This is the kind of Ubuntu Indigenous knowledge production in which I want to engage. George Dei (2000) says this about engaging Indigenous knowledge production in Western academic institutions:

I seek to draw attention to some of the nuances, contradictions and contestations in the project and firmly to assert that Indigenous knowledges have a place in the academy. Indigenous knowledges do not “sit in pristine fashion” outside of the effects of other knowledges . . . The interplay of different knowledges is perhaps one of many reasons why Indigenous knowledges must be taught in the academy. The goal of integrating (i.e. centering) Indigenous knowledges in the academy is to affirm this collaborative dimension of knowledge and, at the same time, to address the emerging call for academic knowledge to speak to the diversity of histories, events, experiences and ideas that have shaped human growth and development. And, if one recognizes that knowledge is not static but rather constantly being created and recreated in context, then Indigenous knowledges need to be an integral part of the ongoing co-creation and re-creation of academic knowledge/work. (p. 113)

A point connected to Dei’s (2000) position on Indigenous knowledge production is that our Ubuntu historiography (Imbo, 2002) reminds us that oral storytelling is done with the purpose of maintaining cultural continuity, while at other times stories allow for cultural directional change. A story can allow a culture to regenerate itself. Storytelling honours our memory (sacred history) while validating our Ubuntu spirit of change, because the only constant in our lives is change. Put simply, our stories are our efforts to create shared interpretation structures about experience so that change has shared meaning.

Allow me to illustrate the Ubuntu Indigenous knowledge production structure for teaching within the Ubuntu context. When a storyteller utters the following introduction words—in
Shona “Paivapo”, in Ndebele “Kwakukhona”, or in Zulu “Kwesukasukela”—the meaning is always the same, “Once upon a time” or “Many, many millet granaries ago” (Wangusa, 1989). On hearing this primer, old and young Ubuntu draw nearer to the storyteller. The phrases are very specific; they let us know that the story is based on historical happenings in olden times. In response to the storytelling prompt of “paivapo”, for example, the Shona audience respond by saying “dzepfunde”, which is “I am ready to learn” or “I am ready to receive your teaching.” Each time the storyteller introduces a new setting in the story, different characters, or conveys the objectives of the characters in the story, she draws the audience in by saying “paivapo.” Whereas, if the storyteller started with “I have a Tsumo [fable] or Amazwi Ahlakaniphileyo [metaphor] . . .”, we would know something challenging and puzzling was going to be presented. Another point communicated by “dzepfunde”, as prompted by “paivapo”, is that through its response the audience actively acknowledges its understanding of how the structure of Ubuntu social engagement functions as an orientation for teaching in the interaction with the storyteller. This prompting goes on until the storyteller is convinced that audience and storyteller are synchronized towards the teaching methods of that particular story.

This synchronization of storyteller and audience is exemplified also among the amaZulu. In her dissertation Mthikazi Roselina Masubelele (2008) quotes N. N. Canonici (1996) on Zulu oral traditions:

Zulu storytelling follows a specific pattern. It has an opening formula which the storyteller usually uses which begins thus: Kwesukasukela! (Once upon a time, it happened) to which the audience’s response is Cosi (small quantity). During the storytelling the audience will be active participants, joining in song and using various facial expressions and gestures that correspond with what is happening in the story. At the end of the story the storyteller will wind up her tale using a concluding formula, which will vary from one storyteller to the other, the most popular being Cosi cosi iyaphela (This is the end of our story), and the audience will respond by saying Siyabonga! Yaze yamnandi indaba yakho (We thank you! What a nice tale it was!). (pp. 59–60)

The trait that stands out in Ubuntu storytelling is its ability to engage through interactive performance. Both the storyteller and listener have very specific functions to perform in the making of the story. The performance of the story makes it whole in the Ubuntu structure. The repetitive quality of the storytelling provides markers for the listener to help facilitate important lessons embedded within the story. A friend put it this way; the markers of an African story are many but the lessons are few.

“Once upon a time . . .” Since the dawn of human societies, as Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has poignantly and reflectively stated, no other universal words pay greater homage to human memory. In her own words; “this opening phrase of what must be the oldest sentence in the world, and the earliest one we remember from childhood, is the foundation stone of things memory—one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge” (cited in Goss & Goss, 1995, p. 15). Unquestionably, for Morrison and most chroniclers of societal unfolding events, storytelling is an important faculty for engaging critical regeneration and honest self-criticism while offering a collective vision for a community’s manifest destiny. The Ubuntu structure of storytelling I use is aimed at making Black people use their stories to talk to other Black people in complex, challenging and sometimes contradicting ways. I want us to be comfortable and uncomfortable with each other’s stories, as this keeps us engaged with each other. Baba always reminded me that it was the move from comfort to discomfort and then inquiry that made good teaching from
storytelling. So, now we are in rhythm about Ubuntu oral methods, let me give an example of how Ubuntu storytelling works.

How Ubuntu storytelling works

My inquiry is a deliberation on telling, and an actual telling. Throughout the text I am a reluctant storyteller in process, carefully considering the questions: Why tell? How to tell? What is it like to tell? (Crowe, 2004, p. 124)

My storytelling encourages us to trouble that which we perceive (Imbo, 2002). In the troubling of our perception we enter the realm of phenomenological interpretation; that is, storytelling encourages us to question our interpretation of meaning because interpretation is an ongoing social process that is always occurring between us. Yet, to talk about Ubuntu in a Western academic institution I have had to use alternative Western genres that allow me to step out of Western paradigms so that I can step into Africanness and introduce Ubuntuness without confusing the reader. Such is the contradiction and irony of being an African Ubuntu in a prestigious Western academic institute. I hope this process will become less tedious as more Blacks across the globe share their stories and memories about what Steve Biko (1996) called the “inward-looking process” of Black consciousness (Black storytelling).

Biko’s (1996) point of writing from an “inward-looking process” was reflected on at an earlier time by Wendell Phillips in a letter of 22 April, 1845, addressed to Frederick Douglass. He wrote:

You remember the old fable “The Man and the Lions”, where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented “when the lions wrote history.” I am glad the time has come when the “lions write history.” (Douglass, 1989, p. xv)

The point I have taken from Wendell Phillips’ letter is this. By writing about our storytelling structure, could I be creating a discourse that challenges other Ubuntus to remember their Indigenous knowledge? Could this research have implications for the African Diaspora in Canada and elsewhere? For me the answer to these questions is an unequivocal yes, as I believe Ubuntuness is an expression of loving Blackness. So let us now engage this Ubuntu storytelling structure.

Most of the stories that I have of Ubuntu teaching were given to me using the oral storytelling approach, but I share my own story using the written oral-narrative approach. The narrative part of oral storytelling is the change that allows me to move away from the active, live performative function of oral storytelling. The narrative approach takes the live performative part of storytelling and puts it into written form. The advantage of this is that the story can be transported across the globe and read by a wider audience. The power of the written storytelling approach has been conveyed by Michael White (2007), who informs us that narratives hold stories with the power to change the way we live our lives, by understanding the attached meaning we bestow on specific stories. By using narrative oral storytelling I have lost the live performative engagement of oral storytelling but I can talk to a broader, diverse Black community. This is the reality of writing. It can never take the place of live performative oral storytelling. The dynamic engagement of live oral storytelling is so powerful it can never be surpassed by any other form of communication. This being said, functionality has led the way, and here I am writing.

I almost forgot to give you an important orientation to Ubuntu storytelling. In traditional Ubuntu orality, the storyteller does not give an analysis of the story she or he is telling. The storyteller leaves each listener to analyse the story, because he or she knows that each person will gain something different from it. Each listener will bring their experience to the
analysis of the story which will reflect their own contextual position, based on age, gender, values, sexuality, political knowledge and social position. Imbo (2002) makes this point about interpretation:

Certainty of perception or judgment properly belongs only to the gods. Any interpretation that insists on being absolute and certain is guilty of a false divinity that can only do violence to other interpretations. (p. 42)

This is why multiple interpretations of the same story are welcomed. Let me illuminate the structure of Ubuntu oral storytelling by giving you a story in the Ubuntu context. To you, my audience, I say: “Paivapò.” And you, my audience, respond to this prompting by saying: “Dzepfunde.”

Now let me start the story in the following manner: On one of my many travels I found myself in a village far away from home. Being a stranger in this village, I began to find my way towards the chief’s home so that I could introduce myself and seek refuge. Seeing a group of young girls coming from the river with balanced clay pots of water on their heads, I felt confident they would know how to direct me to the whereabouts of the chief’s home. Respectfully, I enquired from the girls the whereabouts of the chief’s home, and to my surprise they immediately stopped conversing among themselves. I could sense that they were afraid of talking to me. Fearing that I was transgressing some unknown cultural interaction established between the different age ranges and possibly genders, I started to look for a male who appeared to be in my age range. As I was doing this I heard from the direction of the sunrise a voice that said: “Come toward my voice and I will reveal myself to you.” As I walked towards the sunrise I could clearly see an old hut. At the entrance of the hut the door was open and I hesitated to enter. Sensing my fear, an old woman emerged from within, and while standing aside in her hut entrance invited me in. She offered me water to wash off my dust and a large bowl of cool fresh water to drink. Before I could fully adjust to the light in the hut, steaming hot food was placed before me.

“My kinfolk I die.” I said as a way of honouring our ancestors and this elder mother for feeding me. She responded by saying: “What is there to thank?” From the same pots my food had come from the elder mother served herself a small amount of food to demonstrate she meant me no ill intent.

I ate until I could eat no more, and to wash my food down the elder mother offered me what she called her best beer. Indeed, it was good; it was the best beer I had ever tasted. As I enjoyed the beer the elder and I talked about my travels. At some point our conversation ended and the elder offered to show me around the village, but before we set off she told me that if anyone asked who I was, we were to say I was her grandson from her first daughter who lived in southern Africa. Seeing as this was the direction I had come from I saw no great harm with the elder’s story.

With elder mother as my narrating guide of what I saw, I learned a great deal about the village, and I am sure it was the presence of elder mother that encouraged most people to be welcoming and friendly towards me. Yet, wherever we went in the village, I heard people engaging each other by singing this specific song. Someone would start the song thus:

My kinfolk I die.

Other people near the song starter would respond:

If I am going, let me go.

And the song starter would conclude:

My kinfolk come and see how I die.

To this singing invitation the other people near the song starter would conclude:
If I am going, let me go.

Let me interrupt the story here. As a storyteller, this is a good time in the story to engage and create participation with you my audience. I will sing the song I have just narrated to you, with a strong inviting voice:

My kinfolk I die.

And to this invitation you the audience will respond by singing:

If I am going, let me go.

I then conclude my call part of the song by singing:

My kinfolk come and see how I die.

And you the audience conclude your answering part by singing:

If I am going, let me go.

To insure we are synchronized in this call and answer song we may repeat the full song four or five times. When we have finished this exchange I may ask where we are in the story. It is now your responsibility to orientate me so I can continue where I left off.

Now, let me resume this story. After hearing this song so many times, I inquired from elder mother what the people were trying to communicate. Elder mother responded by saying, “In this matter we dare not speak out; however because you are leaving early tomorrow morning I will give you this mango to eat just before you lay your head down to dream, and in your dream this mango will tell you everything. This mango will tell you everything because it was there the night the killing started.” Of this matter we speak no more until I am about to go to sleep. Elder mother reminds me to eat the mango only when I am about to fall asleep.

Just when I cannot keep my eyes open, because sleep invites me to enter the dream world, I eat the mango. My wake world and my dream world seem one. I am aware I am in a minibus, and a soldier is asking each passenger to whisper in his ear which political party they support. We are all aware that those who give the wrong answer are being killed, raped and mutilated outside the minibus. The bodies of the dead are piling up high outside the minibus. Fearfully I ask no one in particular why this is happening to Ubuntu by the hands of Ubuntu, and a woman with a child on her lap whispers: “Please, shhh, brother or he will think we are trying to fool him, and then for sure he will kill us all without giving us a chance to guess the right party. So please, shhh.” I look to the other side of the minibus and see the elder mother outside the minibus. She is lying in her own blood. She stands up and I recognize that this is the mango tree in front of elder mother’s hut. Slowly and painfully her life blood is oozing out through her ears and mouth. I want to tell her to hang in and wait for me because I know where she is but I am afraid to speak. She looks at me with understanding for my situation, and then I hear her voice in my ear like a whisper; she says, “Ask the mango boy child, it will tell you everything.”

I wake up and look around for the elder mother but I can find no sign of her. I go outside and see the mango tree; it is full of green mangos, except for one, small, beautifully ripe, yellow mango. The contrast of its yellowness and its touch of red blush makes it irresistible to me. Standing on tiptoes I pick the mango from its hanging branch. I am aware of the spiritual presents of elder mother. My story ends here but I hope you keep growing while my story remains stunted.

At this point, I invite you, my audience, to comment and give your interpretation of the meaning of the story. Starting in early childhood, Ubuntu children learn the art of analysing a story by observing older siblings or relatives demonstrate various analyses of a given story. As the young children hear the diverse and sometimes contradictory analyses of the same
story they learn that responsible self-expression is welcome among the Ubuntu. In most situations, when everyone has shared their opinion of the story, the storyteller will go as far as asking for an analysis from a newborn baby. Younger siblings will jokingly speak for their newborn. The point is that the skill of analysing a story or teaching begins at a very young age, and the benefits are that children learn analytical and oral skills early.

Another explanation I need to give is my adoption of written English as the medium to communicate my Ubuntu narratives. Like any other community in the world, the Ubuntu have used many forms of communication to share ideas from one period to another. Alain Ricard (2007), has this to say about the history of writing in Africa:

Africa is everywhere inscribed. From rocks to masks, sculptures, pyramids, and manuscripts one needs but a stubborn and narrow-minded commitment to alphabetic writing to deny that the continent has left graphic marks of its history everywhere. Graphic representation is indeed present . . . Africa is the continent with the largest number of recorded rock art paintings: from the Drakensberg and the Matopos in Southern Africa to the Air in the Sahara, the continent seems to have been populated by crowds of painters eager to record, to pray, or to celebrate. (p. 7)

Alain Ricard’s work reminds me that Africa has been writing for a long time. This means that when scholars (Diamond, 1997; Lefkowitz, 1996) say they cannot find evidence of writing in certain parts of Africa they are telling us only that they cannot find evidence of their cultural understanding of writing. Africa has many diverse forms of writing it has been practising since time immemorial. We have to be careful we do not narrow down what writing is in order to impose our form of writing as the absolute standard of symbolic expression. To impose a single form of writing is to lose some forms of knowledge that could be important for the advancement of humanity as a whole. If I could have written these stories in any of our Ubuntu languages I would have started there and then translated them into English for our global Black family members who do not know these Ubuntu languages. I cannot do this, however, as the technology equipment I use to address my dyslexia is in English only. This is why my starting point is in English; however this also means I must struggle to save the little Zulu, Shona and Nyanja I speak, as I use them less and less in Western global academic institutions. If I want to keep these Ubuntu languages I must actively teach them to my family. Indigenous Ubuntu ways do not enjoy the full recognition of scholarship. Our Ubuntu languages are not taught, and when they are it is never on a full-time basis because they are vulnerable to economic pressures. Our Black languages, histories and politics are forever being considered because they are on the margins and defined as non-essential work.

In the little space allotted to us, such as at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, we can talk about Ubuntu orality as a living history (meaning it allows for change) and about how Ubuntu has both a functional aspect and an aesthetic quality. We can talk about how Ubuntu cave paintings are sacred knowledge. We can talk about how in the Ubuntu worldview the intelligence of nature is recognized, because we believe nature holds bodies of knowledge. Yet in trying to talk about these things, another problem arises for the African writer. Chinua Achebe (1988) addresses this problem in the following manner:

One of the most critical consequences of the transition from oral traditions to written forms of literature is the emergence of individual authorship. The story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendant, the writer in his study, ‘belongs’ to its composer. This shift is
facilitated by the simple fact that, whereas a story that is told has no physical form or solid-
ity, a book has; it is a commodity and can be handled and moved about. But I want to sug-
gest that the physical form of a book cannot by itself adequately account for the emergent
notion of proprietorship. At best it facilitates the will to ownership which is already present.
This will is rooted in the praxis of individualism in its social and economic dimensions.
Part of my artistic and intellectual inheritance is derived from a cultural tradition in which
it was possible for artists to create objects of art which were solid enough and yet make no
attempt to claim, and sometimes even go to great lengths to deny, personal ownership of
what they have created. (pp. 47–48)

As an Ubuntu person writing to our diverse global Black community, let me say that the
story of using storytelling was here before me. I was born into the story, I have gained from the
story, I have added to the story, I am sharing this story with you and giving you this story which
was given to me, because although I will leave the story the story will go on. This is our story,
we co-author it. It has no beginning and no end. It is, simply, our story. So, when I speak about
storytelling, I am speaking about the period during which I am active in our story. Cherokee
Indigenous scholar and storyteller Thomas King (2003) challenges Western notions of property
ownership. He says about the story he has shared with his readers:

It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come
that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now. (p. 29)

Like King, I too say—this is your story, do with it as you will.

Ubuntu stories have helped me stay grounded to my Ubuntu roots. Yet I cannot help but struggle with the following questions: Does it matter that I cannot write in any Ubuntu language? If we were telling this story in ChiNgoni would it be the same? What would be different? What has been lost in translation? Is the story in the right context? Am I philosophizing about it in the right way? When did I start dreaming this unAfrican dream? Fragment memories take me home to the place my spirit comes from, where the problems are all ours and the finger pointing is directed only towards us. Can I ever have this dream back? Do I accept change while learning from the lessons of the past? Okri called this process the metamorphosis of exile, and explained it in the following way: “Exile is a fleeing from one dream to another one. In the process we change, we metamorphose, and our new shapes are never settled” (1997, p. 54). If Okri is right—and I am sure he is—what can my unsettled stories teach you? I hope my unsettled stories will teach you to love yourself, to love your memories, to love your Blackness, to love your spiritual ancestors because they can guide you. I also want you to love humanity while being weary of the abusers and the usurpers. Whether I like it or not, all our actions are connected by the web of life. What Whiteness has done has affected me and what I am doing will affect Whiteness. I acknowledge that my efforts to decolonize will affect not only me but also Whiteness. Now that we are linked by this story, where do I end and where do you begin? Could it be the sacred, spiritual cycle of breath that connects the past, the present and the future into one, Ubuntu?
Glossary

abamhlope  White people
abansundu  literally means dark brown, but in a racially conscious political world it means Black people
amadlozi  ancestral spirits
amai  mother, and also can be used to honour daughters
amaZulu  an ethnic population in South Africa
amazwi  metaphor
ahlakaniphileyo  baba  Father, and also can be used to honour sons
Bantu, Watu or Abantu  Black people, human beings
Chichewa  language from Malawi
cosi  small quantity
Cosi cosi iyaphela  “This is the end of our story”
Cushites  a rename of specific Black people by White people
dzepfunde  “I am ready to receive your teaching”
Maseko Ngoni  Black people who share their ancestral lead, Maseko
maShona  people of Zimbabwe
Munhu, Muntu, Munthu  denoting person in Shona, Zulu and Chichewa
Ngoni  Ubuntu people who migrated from southern Africa
Nyanja  Another language of Malawi
Paivapo (Shona), Kwakukhona (Ndebele), Kwesukasukela (Zulu)  “Once upon a time”
San  an ethnic population in South Africa
Siyabonga  “We thank you”
tsumo  fable
Umuntu ngumuntu ngubuntu  “A person is a person through other people”
Xhosa  Ubuntu (amaZulu), Vanhu (maShona), Watu (Chichewa)
Yaze yamnandi indaba yako  “What a nice tale it was”
to denote human beings
D. D. MUCINA

References


