

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white sans-serif font on a blue rectangular background.

When the earth becomes flesh : towards an embodied ethics in the brokenness of the world

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Ekue, Amélé Adamavi-Aho
DOI	10.58863/20.500.12424/4146291
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-16 22:25:46
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4146291

WHEN THE EARTH BECOMES FLESH: TOWARDS AN EMBODIED ETHICS IN THE BROKENNESS OF THE WORLD

Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué

*Why is life so fragile? ⁵¹
Why can't we find the words to make right what is wrong?
Why can't we touch with tenderness instead of force?⁵²*
– Lizette Galima Tapia-Raquel

Introduction

When I was a child, I remember walking through the forest of my West African home country to go to school*. We were always a group of children and the walk would take us around a quarter of an hour, but in my memory it seemed so much longer. This is not only due to the fact

⁵¹ An earlier version of this contribution has been presented at the Indonesian Symposium on Religious Life, 3 November 2020.

⁵² Lizette Galima Tapia-Raquel: *Crying-Out, Resisting, Asserting, Celebrating. Proclamation and Poetry*. Dasmarinas City: Union Theological Seminary, 2015: 171.

* DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/4146291> © Globethics Publications | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

that we literally took our time, but more importantly, that we walked, and by walking our feet touched the soil. During the rainy season the path through the forest would transform into mud, what for the remaining part of the year would be dry, reddish earth.

I cherished those moments, early in the morning, at midday and late in the afternoon. This was a time we had to ourselves, playing, chatting, and, over and over again, encountering nature. It was a spontaneous and intimate encounter, not one that was driven by a pedagogical agenda, like the one underlying our biology and experiential learning classes at school. We would pass by a mango tree, savor the ripe fruits, when it was the right season, and we would play all sorts of games with the kernels. We would also collect leaves, beans, corn, and different kinds of seeds to transform them into bracelets and hair ornaments, or display them on the soil in form of imaginary houses and landscapes, in which we would immerse ourselves. In my recollection, these early childhood exposures to nature were almost seem-less, we had the impression that we were genuinely part of the natural elements surrounding us, not only walking through or past them. How often did we fall over roots and used the leaves to remove the earthen traces on our knees or to conceal our wounds?

These experiences of living with and in nature were probably exacerbated by the fact that in those days material privileges and digital distractions were quasi-absent. Our parents insisted that we would walk to school and back home four times a day, and walking to school – at all seasons, while taking in, with all our senses, what nature had to offer – was our most joyful play time. When pondering on this experience, it dawns on me that *walking through the forest* may not be the accurate words to use, rather we sensed that *the forest walked through us*. There was an intangible physical extension from our bodies to the natural elements and from them to us.

Later my travels took me around the world, enabling me to observe how in different regions and countries people would forge material and epistemological repositories of such interrelations between humanity and the natural world. As a theologian and ethicist, I developed a keen interest in the way people make meaning of these and other connections within their respective religious symbolic systems. I discovered gradually that this meaning-making has not only a vertical dimension around human rationality and spirituality, but also a horizontal dimension, which hints to the *being-with*,⁵³ being in relation with others, human and other-than-humans in this world. Time and again, I would learn that people would describe this *being-with* – living and existing in communion with other living beings – as transcending the human comprehension and all aspirations of feasibility and control. Ultimately, this communion is embedded in the mystery and sanctity of life.

Locating the Theme

The topic I propose to reflect upon in this contribution has thus both a biographical and a scholarly location, which deserves to be acknowledged. In my research and intellectual inquiry in the field of religion and ethics, I begin to understand and to develop a conceptual framework, in which my attention to human and religious life is connected with a kind of *ecology of meaning-making*. It is about asking questions on how sense, meaning and orientation in human existence can be experienced and articulated in relation to all living, transcending the habitual boundaries of human/non-human, nature, culture and history.

⁵³ I am indebted to Efoé J. Pénoukou for his conceptual development and contextualisation of the notion of *being-there-with*, reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's *Mitsein/Mitdasein*, see: Id., "Christologie au village", in: François Kabasélé, Joseph Doré, René Luneau (eds): *Chemins de la christologie africaine*. Paris: Desclée, 2001: 79-111.

In the scholarly field, these questions resonate with a strand of inquiry in environmental ethics preoccupied with the destructive impact of human enterprise on the natural environment, urging to interrogate anthropological concepts. In the humanities, in general, there seems to be a greater awareness for the urgency of asking one central question afresh: *who is the human?* The responses to this question vary and depend on religious, cultural and epistemological standpoints, ranging from emphasising the singularity of the human being as the only being with moral status, encompassing a series of ethical consequences vis-à-vis the relationship to other species and natural elements, to positions attributing moral status to all living beings.⁵⁴ The pivotal point of this reflection is not only the critical introspection of human agency and responsibility for the destruction of the environment and the ensuing questions of justice in an unequally affected world, but more so the intrinsic connection between living on this earth in relation to others.

⁵⁴ See *inter alia*: Peter Singer: *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*. New York: Random House, 1975; Id.: *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1993; Id.: *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002; James Lovelock: *Gaia. A New Look on Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; Arne Naess: *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: An Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; George Sessions (ed.): *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century. Readings on the philosophy and practice of the new environmentalism*. Boston: Shambala Publications, 1995; Bill Devall, George Sessions: *Deep Ecology. Living as if Nature Mattered*. Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1985; Andrew Linzey: *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Satish Kuma/John Lane (eds): *Images of Earth and Spirit: A Resurgence Art Anthology*. Totnes: Green, 2003; Sally McFague: *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000; Id.: *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

More recently another research strand has emerged in social and cultural anthropology which can be made fruitful for an ethical discussion of the present subject. This research aims at moving the boundaries between the human and the natural world, dislocating the asymmetries, retrieving the hidden connections and investigating the nexus of humans, plants and other-than human species.⁵⁵ This interdisciplinary field certainly bears the potential for deepened conversations at the intersection of anthropology, religion, epistemology, culture, natural sciences, and ethics.

The theme of an embodied ethics⁵⁶ appears as a novel area of academic exploration from the perspective of care, empathy and embodiment. It is about asking questions on the moral agency from within a bodily experience and presence. This is not to say that there is a unique ethical approach that is informed by this perspective, nor that such an approach would be the only path to conduct an inquiry in applied ethics. However, it is about making fruitful the discourse on the body for revisiting an understanding of applied ethics in our current times. This is relevant not only for the areas of normative ethics and

⁵⁵ See Jane Bennett: *Vibrant Matter. A political ecology of things*. New York: Duke University Press, 2010; Eduardo Kohn: *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2013; Michael Marder: *Plant-Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013; William Ellis: "A Tree Walks through the Forest: Milkwoods and other botanical witnesses", *Catalyst*, Vol. 5, 2 (2019): 1-4.

⁵⁶ See Maurice Hamington: *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004; John T. Leahy, "Embodied Ethics: Some Common Concerns of Religion and Business", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 5, 6 (1986): 465-472; Leonore Wadsworth Hervey, "Embodied Ethical Decision Making", *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 29 (2007): 91-108.

bioethics⁵⁷, but also for social, intercultural, interreligious and environmental ethics. In religious studies, one can notice a renaissance of the awareness for physicality and materiality in the analysis of religious practice and in the interpretation of its value for grasping more profoundly the meaning how a bodily presence and experience is connected to the social, economic and cultural milieus, but also the spiritual dimensions. In other words, the proposal to reflect upon ethics from the perspective of embodiment is a genuinely reflective – not an ideological – exercise, unfolded and explicated in the following sections. First, it is about unveiling the salient learnings of our contemporary times for ethical reflection and action against the background of the pandemic experience. Secondly, I will propose to embark on looking more closely to the implications for understanding of an ethics of ecological care in the context of a divided world. Last but not least, I will describe the contours of an embodied ethics in an uneven world.

Reading the Signs of the Time

Living in these times of a global pandemic marks all life in a particular way. It unveils, accentuates and brings to the fore societal rifts, that may have been there previously, but now appear in a new light calling for a fresh awareness for the unescapable entanglement of all life.

I would wish to begin my explorations with highlighting three dimensions – *space and time, vulnerability and resilience, divisions and relations* – as guiding threads for the subsequent stages of the reflection. These dimensions are selected because of their exemplarity and do not intend to represent an exhaustive list of aspects to be considered in this context.

⁵⁷ See Margrit Shildrick, Roxanne Mykytiuk (Eds): *Ethics of the Body. Postconventional Challenges*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2005.

Living and experiencing the current global pandemic impels to revisit some of the most pervasive assumptions about human existence. According to one of these postulations prosperity of human life would primarily be bound to economic growth, hence a series of economic and development strategies that would emphasize this vision. However, since several decades this postulate receives recurrent critique, and a major challenge has become obvious, namely, as Jan-Eirik Sørensen states: “how to balance the needs of the planet with the need to bring billions of people into the global economy.”⁵⁸ The international discourse on sustainable development goals has certainly contributed to a more broadly accepted consciousness and responsibility of state and civil society actors for working on overcoming the divorce between caring for present and future generations, the state of the earth and a global ‘green’ economy that caters for exact these needs.⁵⁹

This is by far not self-evident as any reassessment of habitual thinking or practice requires distance from the actual incidence. Therefore, the reflection on what occurs at this moment in history can only be provisional and intermediary. Simultaneously, immediacy and urgency become more readily available interpretations of how people make meaning of time in this unprecedented period. It is, however, not a detached interpretation of time that is at stake, but use time wisely to create and share knowledge built on insights we share with one another, and those which may differ across regions, cultures and religions.

⁵⁸ Jan-Eirik Sørensen: “The Role of the World Trade Organisation”, in: Lewis S. Mudge, Thomas Wieser (eds): *Democratic Contracts for Sustainable and Caring Societies. What Can Churches and Christian Communities Do?* Geneva: WCC, 2000: 74-80: 76.

⁵⁹ See e.g. the UNEP report *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication – A Synthesis for Policy Makers*, s.l., 2011. www.unep.org/greeneconomy.

From this fundamental dimension of space and time other implications relevant for an ethical conversation can be derived. It seems that our sense for time and space is exacerbated. Almost two years have passed, in which peoples' lives have been marked by an event that escapes all habitual categories. An invisible and intangible virus holds us in firm grip, disrupts interactions, mobility, and simultaneously the capacity to define space. The virus being a reality worldwide, it is literally *in* the space, it is everywhere, and at the same time it reduces the radius of personal and collective spaces and the movements within the social spaces. The shifts in social, cultural and religious life from visible movements across borders, commuting to work, being present in offices and encountering others on streets and in other public spaces, to disrupted and invisible lives with work in home offices, changed family and educational patterns with home schooling and distant learning are illustrations for the radical way in which the comprehension of time and space altered rapidly over a period of a few months.

There appears also to exist an ambiguous experience of *elongated time* – for example with the prolonged time necessary for medical research on a secure vaccine – on the one hand, and the observation that the elapsed time since the outbreak of the pandemic is experienced by many as an *accelerated time*. Social distancing measures to contain the spread of the virus are in contradiction to many of social practices and culturally coded conventions, and indicative of the altered experience of space. Living together is based on being able to come close within a space, to share it and to cooperate, and yet we realise how our presence in a space and at a given time, together with others, has changed and will most probably continue to transform societies, communities and modes of interaction.⁶⁰ Political measures destined to contain the spread

⁶⁰ See Richard Sennett: *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2000; Id: *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

of the virus further deepen societal rifts and questions around a possible normative consensus on what needs to be done. It seems that time is one indicator to be read more carefully in conjunction with proposed solutions. In other words, how does the experience of time as scarce and finite category influence, by way of illustration, decision-making and action vis-à-vis societal and environmental urgencies.

This leads to the consideration of a second dimension, designated by the notions of vulnerability and resilience. While these are not new as categories to describe the situation of dependency and agency of individuals, groups and natural elements on external influences and impact, the novelty in our time resides in the intensification of their relevance for ethical solicitation.⁶¹ It is in and through the recognition of *the vulnerable self* and the encounter with the face of the other, as Emmanuel Levinas named it, that ethical responses can emerge and be articulated: “In his (the other’s, A.E.) face, the human is most naked, is destitution. (...) The face looks at me and calls me. It lays claim to me.”⁶² These ethical responses are not thoughts or acts distorted by asymmetric relationships, but those sponsored by a generous, non-invasive and considerate turning to ‘the other’ out of a realisation of vulnerability calling for the responsiveness of the other. It may be

⁶¹ See Emmanuel Levinas: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969; Judith Butler: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso Books, 2006; Id., Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds): *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press; Martha Albertson Fineman: “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition”, *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 20,1 (2008): 1-23; Miroslav Volf: *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006; Heike Springhart, Günter Thomas (eds): *Exploring Vulnerability*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017.

⁶² Jill Robbins (ed.): *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002: 127.

interesting to expand on these lines of thought around the relationship and the encounter with the other in the context of nature and the experience of nature as the encounter with the other, which can offer strong impulses for understanding more thoroughly how humans are related to those who do not resemble them, or whom they want to resemble. Indigenous ritual practices in form of ecological rites, in which the connection of human life to nature or natural elements is celebrated, could serve as vivid illustrations for frameworks and practices built upon the recognition of viable bridges between culture and nature.⁶³

This is what these times evoke also about *divisions and relationships*, the third dimension deserving to be reflected upon more deeply. It seems that the virus in its effect on societal life, and life in general, reveals a double bind. On the one hand, it accentuates existing divisions between ethnic and social groups.⁶⁴ On the other hand, it shows the aspirations for experiencing and articulating more clearly identity and belonging in a broader web of relationships on earth.⁶⁵ It remains of importance to maintain and work on the tension that emerges from this tension: the societal divisions are results and reflections of imperfect and often distorted perceptions of the humane, and the relationships are marked by these divisions, in as much as they are simultaneously critical articulation and claims for correction. Ethics

⁶³ See, *inter alia*, John A. Grim (ed.): *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁶⁴ Eunjung Lee, Marjorie Johnston: "Resisting the Politics of the Pandemic and Racism to Foster Humanity", *Qualitative Social Work*, 20, 1-2 (2020): 225-232, hint to these impacts of the pandemic.

⁶⁵ See Upolu Luma Vaai: "'We are Therefore We Live.' Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story." *Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief. No. 56 (October 2019)*: 1-15.

cannot be thought and revisited without considering this provocative ambiguity.

What is an Ethics of Ecological Care?

How do we want to live together? What visions do we have for peaceful cohabitation, sharing of wealth, knowledge and worldview? That would be a set of questions one may wish to investigate upon from an intercultural ethical perspective. However, the primary task may consist in a rather unconventional mapping exercise not so much on how different ethical propositions are articulated from within contextual situations, cultural, religious and secular traditions, but by paying attention to the subtle intrusion of dominating patterns in the intercultural conversation on how humans can be better stewards of the earth. As Upolu Luma Vaai notes for his own context of the Pacific islands: “‘Shared stewardship’ and securing a future can only be credible, when the ways of knowing and being of the Pacific people are considered holistically and are integral part to development strategies, including climate change and conflict discussions...”⁶⁶ It may be worthwhile to investigate, to take conscious note of and to *describe thoroughly* the different understandings of human existence in and connection with nature across diverse cultural contexts in view of developing common strategies in full respect of divergent rationales.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Upolu Luma Vaai: *ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁷ A view that Upolu Luma Vaai, *ibid.*, 4, develops with regard to the climate change narrative, when he writes: “The dominant climate narrative is framed to focus on science alone, therefore emphasising only the physically tangible things. As a result, this fosters climate solutions from a secular perspective that may not touch deeply the unseen wounds of societies.”

Such a *thick description*⁶⁸ would enable to understand how ethics is rooted in cultural frameworks of meaning-making, and formulated from different standpoints and self-understandings. This would lead to a genuine intercultural conversation on normative conflicts, which demand a continuous exchange and dialogue. It is obvious how normative conflicts can weigh on societal relationships, but also how it can influence the manner in which human life in relation to other-than-human life is understood. To arrive at a normative consensus can be a cumbersome journey. Some of the most challenging ethical dilemmas in the field of medicine, international relations and environmental protection are dependent on worldview, ritual practice and normative foundations. Therefore it is of paramount importance to hold together the rationale for ethics – how people develop systems of reasoning, belief and ritual practice around their reflection and decision making – and the ethical practice itself.

What then is an ethics of ecological care? In this context, it is important to recall the full extent of the meaning of ecology,⁶⁹ as describing the relationships of all living to one another and to the environment in which they exist, including the full breadth of underpinning conditions and possibilities of articulation. In prominent contributions to the debate on ethics of care,⁷⁰ the juxtaposition of

⁶⁸ Clifford Geertz: “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in: Id., *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973: 3-30.

⁶⁹ See Elizabeth Carolyn Miller: “Ecology”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 46, 3-4 (2018): 653-656, referring to Ernst Haeckel’s original reference to ecology as the relations of the organism to the environment in the broadest sense, including also all conditions of existence.

⁷⁰ See, *inter alia*, Carol Gilligan: *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982; Michael Slote: *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. London/New York: Routledge, 2007; Joan C. Tronto: “An Ethic of Care”, *Generations*, Vol. 22.3 (1998): 15-20; Id.:

justice and care has been underlined. Accordingly, an ethics of justice would emphasise the equal treatment of all under all circumstances, and, by contrast, an ethics of care would stress the interests and needs of other in view of nurturing and maintaining harmonious relationships.

It may well be, that this contrasting positioning of an ethics of justice versus an ethics of care describes the divergence in an overemphasized manner. The bridge between the two ethical approaches, particularly seen through an ecological lens, may be built by recognising the contextuality and intentionality – and as such a qualitative dimension – of turning to others and the earth with consideration for their needs as much as for their rights.⁷¹

One of the characteristics of our contemporary societies is that they constitute culturally, religiously and economically plural societies, in which the individual and the collectives forge their self-understanding against the background of disparate systems of normative plausibility. This prompts to approach an ethics of ecological care by way of engaging in a plural dialogue, a ‘megalogue’ on plurality, how to deal with it in view of normative consensus-building, and on the different ethical propositions themselves. Against this background, some have called for understanding an ethics of ecological care as an inviting ethics, which takes account of the plurality by developing an ethical methodology that stresses the convening character of ethics as a framework of believing, thinking and acting.

At the same time, such a reflection emphasises a critical introspection of human agency and anthropocentrism. Is it possible to

Who Cares? How to reshape Democratic Politics. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.

⁷¹ An interesting new research currently emerges around the topic of plant/animal rights, see e.g. Jan A. Schulp: “Animal Rights/Plant Rights”, *Research in Hospitality Management*, 9,2 (2019): 109-112.

think about relating to the earth without resorting outside of the paradigms of functionality, usefulness, and greed? James Lovelock portrays the relationship of humans with nature with war, when he warns: “We are unintentionally at war with Gaia, and to survive with our civilization intact we urgently need to make a just peace with Gaia while we are strong enough to negotiate and a defeated, broken rabble on the way to extinction.”⁷² Lovelock’s scenario seems to set humans *against* the earth and vice versa.⁷³ However, there may be a potential for developing at least a consciousness for ways in which humans are both dependent, undeniably in need of nature and its resources, but rather from a position of contemplation or concentrated observation, not of dominion and exploitation. This would constitute in analogy to interpersonal relationship the necessary pause – allowing for a non-invasive, silent space of waiting,⁷⁴ experiencing, cognitively and non-cognitively, the integrity and dignity of all living beings and the manner in which they are interconnected.

It remains critical to think about the purpose of an ethics of ecological care in the context of brokenness. The very concrete markers

⁷² James Lovelock: *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back - and How We Can Still Save Humanity*. London: Penguin Books, 2006: 153.

⁷³ Lovelock is a climate scientist who understands the earth as a system that will return itself into balance, if brought into disequilibrium by human interference. He utilises as sematic figure the Greek deity *Gaia*, rebelling against her residents, if they dissatisfy her.

⁷⁴ See Miroslav Volf: *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, who in his poignant exposition of the “drama of the embrace” – opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms and opening the arms again – calls attention to the necessity of an interval to allow for a free, non-invasive act of response (or denial thereof) to happen. This space of interpersonal encounter may also serve as a line of thought to be deepened with regard to an ecological ethics of care and transposed to describe the non-functional interconnection with other living beings.

of societal divisions manifest themselves in various forms of economic, social and discriminatory disparities. The translation of the term division into *brokenness* is intentional. It relates to the proposal to describe the contours of an ethics of ecological care not so much from the perspective of its *contents* (i.e. the normative prerogatives), but more so from the perspective of *form and methodology* (i.e. what it enables to perceive in view of arriving to an informed ethical response). If we understand the world as broken it evokes a symbolic imagery that includes the reality of the societal divisions, but connects at the same time to a broader range insights that can be anchored in an intercultural and interreligious conversation on ethics of ecological care.

When the Earth Becomes Flesh: Applying an Embodied Ethics in a Broken World

This symbolic imagery of brokenness could be further unfolded. My proposal is to understand an ethics of ecological care as an ethics that takes seriously the embodiment as the capacity of humans to experience in and through their bodies something of the mysterious gift that sustains all life, not only human life, and by way of this participation can develop reflective and practical responses to ethical solicitations.

Two brief vignettes may illustrate this approach. The first vignette relates to the research work of William Ellis on trees as natural repositories of collective memory and human history. Ellis investigates milkwood trees, a species of trees in the South African region inhabited by the Khoi and San people. Ellis observes and asks: “..how this vast milkwood forest, which once covered the coastline from the Cape into the Eastern Cape, was and is part of a vast rhizomatic, vegeto-neural network that discursively, symbolically, and epigenetically retains

events and evidence.”⁷⁵ Through this research and the light shed an often underscored layer of connection between humans and plants, William Ellis offers a fresh perspective on how collective memories could be, in the most literal sense, kept alive, as living stories narrated and transmitted from one generation to another, not only by humans but also by plants, whose roots grow deep into the earth. Ellis pursues to state: “These trees are the true monument to Khoi and San because it is under the branches of these trees that they worked and played. (...) It would seem fitting that for these reasons the milkwoods (...) are really a marker of curated ‘Khoisan outside.’”⁷⁶ Could it be that these trees are not only repositories of human history but also autonomous bearers of meaning-making in a complex web of individuals, community and nature?⁷⁷

These anthropological endeavours to establish so called rhizomatic connections between humans and the plant world are thought-provoking. They lead to reflect upon ethical solicitation not only in terms of human-to-human interpellation and exhortation, which would repose primarily on the cognitive integration of what needs to be done or avoided to preserve the earth – for the sake of its own intrinsic value.

The second vignette deals with the physical experience of the ruins of a slave-owner’s house on the West African coast are the painful

⁷⁵ William Ellis: “A Tree Walking through the Forest: Milkwoods and other Botanical Witnesses.” *Catalyst* 5,2 (2019): 1-4.

⁷⁶ William Ellis: *ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁷ I am indebted to Jenne Jessica R. Pieter, who, in her unpublished research paper “Knowledge and Empathy: A fresh perspective from indigenous people on sustainability of Maluku in higher education” of 25 June 2020, offers valuable insights from her research in the Maluku islands on the holistic worldview of *Adat*, according to which “Maluku nature is manifested in the group and in every personal existence. Mountains, land, sea, all nature, and the groups are a complete picture of the Moluccan people.” (2).

reminders of a dark history. When walking on the soil surrounding this edifice, entering it to see the vestiges of the basement, barely one meter and a half high, where the enslaved were held in captivity prior to their deportation, it dawned on me that it is neither from the materiality of the building, nor the earth on which it was built, nor in the discourse, oral and written, about the ineffable and painful events of the past that the ethical solicitation would emerge, but from the 'space-in-between.'⁷⁸ The space, in which the material world, the natural and constructed environment, blends in with the intangible and yet ever-present collective memory. In this sense, not only the human beings, and the lineage of human beings through whom the trauma stories are transmitted, would play a central role, but the whole inhabited earth and through it all living beings.

It will undoubtedly constitute a rewarding task for further research from an intercultural perspective to unearth more of these examples at the micro-level and in different contexts that will assist in appreciating the permeability between human and natural life as a basis for ethical investigations.

This is valid for accepting a dual critical perspective for the way human agency has contributed to the destruction of the environment,⁷⁹ for the ethical implication of seeing humans in their interrelatedness with the created world as earth communities,⁸⁰ and, ultimately, for the way responsibility has to be built into the collection of stories on these

⁷⁸ Homi Bhabha's third space theory could be an avenue to be made fruitful in this context. See: Id.: *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.

⁷⁹ Ernst M. Conradie: *An Ecological Christian Anthropology. At Home on Earth?* London: Routledge, 2016.

⁸⁰ Larry L. Rasmussen: *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, 2000.

embodied experiences to form *world archives*.⁸¹ World archives, to develop Achille Mbembe's contribution further, of a different kind, whose primary role would not be to function as a relic and as an "*instituting imaginary*,"⁸² but could serve as living collections of cross-cultural learning on what it means to walk with the earth, as opposed to walk on the earth.

Conclusion

This exploration began with an anecdotal reference to a personal childhood experience of being-with others in nature. This served as an anchor and starting point for the subsequent explication of an embodied ethics, which takes both the material and physical experiences, as well as the cognitive dimensions connected to meaning-making seriously. The proposition brought forward is to read the signs of the time as an urgent call for overcoming divisions (not differences) and utilise the immediacy of the diverse bodily experiences as an opportunity for a cross-cultural investigation in an ethics of ecological care, an investigation which was exemplified with the categories of space and time, vulnerability and resilience, divisions and relations.

The plea is to consider that overcoming the divisions in our in many ways broken world would not consist in glossing over the differences, by way of a totalising or essentialising approach, nor to understand applied ethics as a possibility to develop a blue print for globally applicable solutions. Rather, as per our proposal, the recognition of the simultaneity of vulnerability and dignity of all life would lead into a

⁸¹ Achille Mbembe: "The Power of the Archive and its Limits", in: Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris et al. (eds): *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002: 19-26.

⁸² Achille Mbembe, *ibid.*, 22.

non-invasive and non-dominating considerateness for all life, human and other-than-human, from within an ethos of care and empathy.

An ethics of ecological care, understood as an embodied ethics, would simultaneously serve the need to build *world archives*, as Achille Mbembe suggests, and to foster the knowledge exchange and transfer between people in different cultural and religious locations.

At the same time, it is a propitious moment to ponder on the moral imagination and ethical practice, and therefore on the future of a world whose brokenness may not be mended completely, but can undoubtedly constitute the subject of a continued mindfulness from the position of an *ethos of vulnerable caring*. Vulnerable caring because one has experienced vulnerability *in oneself* and has turned to ‘the other’ in considerateness without succumbing to the fallacy of superiority. A moment of recognition that applying ethics is living our lives as social, cultural and religious beings in neighborhood, reciprocal relationship and in regard for the inner dignity of all living, from which flow all values and principles that shape our existence. This is not a once-and-for-all achievement, it amounts to a perpetual effort, until and when the earth becomes flesh.

Bibliography

- Albertson Fineman, Martha: “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition”, *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 20, 1 (2008): 1-23.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A political ecology of things*. New York: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.
- Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.):

Vulnerability in Resistance. Durham: Duke University Press.

Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso Books, 2006.

Conradie, Ernst M.: *An Ecological Christian Anthropology. At Home on Earth?* London: Routledge, 2016.

Devall, Bill, George Sessions: *Deep Ecology. Living as if Nature Mattered*. Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1985.

Ellis, William: "A Tree Walking through the Forest: Milkwoods and other Botanical Witnesses." *Catalyst* 5, 2 (2019): 1-4.

Geertz, Clifford: "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in: *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973: 3-30.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Grim, John A. (ed.): *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Hamington, Maurice: *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Kohn, Eduardo: *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2013.

Kuma, Satish /John Lane (eds.): *Images of Earth and Spirit: A Resurgence Art Anthology*. Totnes: Green, 2003.

- Leahy, John T. "Embodied Ethics: Some Common Concerns of Religion and Business", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 5, 6 (1986): 465-472.
- Lee, Eunjung; Marjorie Johnston: "Resisting the Politics of the Pandemic and Racism to Foster Humanity", *Qualitative Social Work*, 20, 1-2 (2020): 225-232.
- Levinas, Emmanuel: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Linzey, Andrew: *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Lovelock, James: *Gaia. A New Look on Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back - and How We Can Still Save Humanity*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Luma Vaai, Upolu: "'We are Therefore We Live.' Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story." *Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief. No. 56 (October 2019)*: 1-15.
- Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Mbembe, Achille: "The Power of the Archive and its Limits", in: Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris et al. (eds): *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002: 19-26.
- McFague, Sally: *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Miller, Elizabeth Carolyn: "Ecology", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 46, 3-4 (2018): 653-656.

Naess, Arne: *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: An Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Pénoukou, Efoé J. "Christologie au village", in: François Kabasélé, Joseph Doré, René Luneau (eds): *Chemins de la christologie africaine*. Paris: Desclée, 2001: 79-111.

Rasmussen, Larry L.: *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, 2000.

Robbins, Jill (ed.): *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Schulp, Jan A.: "Animal Rights/Plant Rights", *Research in Hospitality Management*, 9, 2 (2019): 109-112.

Sennett, Richard: *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2000.

—. *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Sessions, George (ed.): *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century. Readings on the philosophy and practice of the new environmentalism*. Boston: Shambala Publications, 1995.

Shildrick, Margrit, Roxanne Mykytiuk (eds.): *Ethics of the Body. Postconventional Challenges*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2005.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*. New York: Random House, 1975.

— *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*.

Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1993.

— *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Slote, Michael. *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. London/New York: Routledge, 2007.

Sørensen, Jan-Eirik: “The Role of the World Trade Organisation”, in: Lewis S. Mudge, Thomas Wieser (eds.): *Democratic Contracts for Sustainable and Caring Societies. What Can Churches and Christian Communities Do?* Geneva: WCC, 2000: 74-80: 76.

Springhart, Heike; Günter Thomas (eds.): *Exploring Vulnerability*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017.

Tapia-Raquel, Lizette Galima: *Crying-Out, Resisting, Asserting, Celebrating. Proclamation and Poetry*. Dasmariñas City: Union Theological Seminary, 2015.

Tronto, Joan C. “An Ethic of Care”, *Generations*, Vol. 22.3 (1998): 15-20.

— *Who Cares? How to reshape Democratic Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.

UNEP report *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication – A Synthesis for Policy Makers*, s.l., 2011. www.unep.org/greeneconomy.

Volf, Miroslav: *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

Wadsworth Hervey, Leonore. “Embodied Ethical Decision Making”, *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 29 (2007): 91-108.