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Towards the Pluriverse
How to connect Degrowth and Ubuntu

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Abstract

This thesis scrutinizes the possibilities for a connection of Degrowth and Ubuntu within a transition discourse, thereby promoting the validity of pluriversal knowledges. It presents and compares the two philosophies, brings arguments for a connection and discusses possible benefits. It draws from expert interviews, observations and informal interviews conducted in a two months research period in South Africa as well as Sweden.

The thesis shows that Ubuntu and Degrowth have essential commonalities regarding their core values and some of their practices, which makes an alliance between them justifiable despite their ontological and epistemological differences. Furthermore, it will be shown that both philosophies can benefit from a connection. How a connection could be established more concretely will be shown through utilizing a decolonial approach as well as the concept of situated knowledges. This will be illustrated with an example; a possible common approach of Ubuntu and Degrowth towards environmental sustainability.

It thereby makes a case for a bigger engagement with unknown ways of living and knowing, for which the recognition of their situatedness is crucial. Decolonization must start with recognition, but it also needs to go further; there is a need to try to understand different contexts, a need for active engagement. This can reveal commonalities, and in this way a common strategy towards specific goals within a bigger transition agenda would become more feasible.

Keywords: Degrowth, Ubuntu, Transition, Post-Development, Decoloniality, Situated Knowledge, Pluriverse, Environmental Sustainability

Preface

I encountered Ubuntu a couple of years ago, when I visited South Africa for the first time. Back then, I could not grasp it, and people had difficulties articulating it, or rather: I had difficulties understanding their explanations. It made me very curious and since then I strive to understand it. I feel that it entails values that should be promoted, values that are already promoted even though they are packaged differently. With this thesis I do not want to tell people what to do, I do not want to attempt a singular explanation of Ubuntu or improve it through my ways of thinking, and I do not seek to make grand claims about it. I want to make people aware of it and make people aware of other ways of living that should be more recognized and valued. Academically, this thesis is intended to broaden the platform for dialogues between knowledges, emphasize the importance of engagement among different ways of knowing the world: trying to understand instead of alienating, approaching instead of distancing, and looking for similarities instead of differences.

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1. Introduction

The world's population seems to drift more and more apart: borders materialize in actual walls or the most powerful country in the world, led by a misogynist business man denounces contracts aimed at unity, such as the Paris agreement or just recently a nuclear agreement with Iran. Furthermore, the inequalities within and among countries are on the rise and nationalist political parties are gaining ground all over the globe. All these trends are based in a growing emphasis of differences between people, groups, religions and countries.

These differences have initially been constructed hierarchically during colonial times to justify the physical exploitation of others. During that time, Europe has been placed at the top of the hierarchical construct, and with it European ways of living, knowing and understanding whilst dominating and subalternizing¹ other ways of being. Nowadays, people are drawn to pursue this 'Western'² lifestyle, due to its promises of wealth, prosperity and a good life. However, as research has shown,³ this specific way of life does not lead to a better life. Even worse, the obsessive pursuit of it is causing environmental degradation whilst reinforcing social and economic inequalities. Essentially, today's power relations follow the very same trajectory as a colonial one.

These realities have found recognition in academia as well as in politics. Scholars for example point out how differences are very often socially constructed,⁴ and politics are developing strategies that encourage the involvement of local and traditional knowledges.⁵ Furthermore, there is a growing discourse on the shortcomings of one single dominant way of producing knowledge, with demands being made to accept subalternized ways of living and knowing as equally valid and important.⁶ Broadening ways of knowing is essential for a societal transition away from lifestyles that harm nature and people: Doing so could provide strategies for more sustainable ways of living, that have been neglected up to now, but is also a necessary step to rethink the power relations that are attributed to different knowledges and ways of living. Within

¹ The term 'subaltern' was coined by Antonio Gramsci, describing parts of the population that are socially, politically and/or geographically excluded from the hegemonic power structure. Spivak expanded this term onto a global level, and pointed out that subaltern groups are not homogenous (Louai 2012). Burman (2016) explained that there is a need to call it subaltern-ized to emphasize that these groups were not actively involved in the process of becoming subalternized.

² From a Eurocentric worldview emerged a 'Western' focus in the world, adding for example the USA to modern European countries, therefore the terms are used interchangeably. It must be pointed out, that not one but many *Westernized* ways of life can be deviated from this 'Western' focus. For the sake of the argument these plural ways are summarized into that term. The binary view of *Westernized* and *Other* must be regarded very critically.

³ See for example the Easterlin-Paradox, which states that income only influences happiness until a certain point – if the income gets higher than that, it does not make the person happier; See Easterlin 1974.

⁴ See for example Barad 2003.

⁵ One example are Community Based Resource Management approaches, that combine local and transnational approaches towards resource management. More information for example in Brosius et al. 1998.

⁶ See for example Burman 2017 or Escobar 2016.

this discourse I want to position this thesis by making a case for the connection of Degrowth and Ubuntu.

Ubuntu describes a traditional life philosophy from South Africa with a focus on communal living, while Degrowth is a philosophy that combines different approaches towards a more sustainable way of living which is specifically not aimed at growth. These two philosophies⁷ represent knowledges from different contexts, that are recognized and acknowledged differently. For tackling the hierarchical structures among such different ways of knowing, there needs to be engagement between and among them, different knowledges must be recognized equally. Hence, I am going to use a decolonial approach, using the idea of knowledge being situated and decolonial thinking, to propose ways for engaging actively. Since approaching a transition towards systemic change needs to be a common global project, borders need to be crossed. Commonalities between different ontologies, epistemologies or philosophies from different cultures are crucial in bridging alternatives and establishing a systemic transition as a global project. This thesis thus broadens the engagement of the increasingly popular Degrowth ideas with the subalternized philosophical knowledge system of Ubuntu. The research has been pursued through the following research questions.

Research Questions

- a. How are Degrowth and Ubuntu theorized and practiced?
 - How do these philosophies approach environmental sustainability?
- b. How do Ubuntu and Degrowth differ and how are they similar?
 - Is a connection based on the differences and similarities justified?
- c. What are the opportunities and ways to relate Ubuntu and Degrowth more closely?

To answer these research questions, the thesis will be structured as follows. Firstly, I present a background to the thesis, illustrating the entanglement of contemporary crises, briefly the philosophies of Degrowth and Ubuntu, and the coloniality of knowledge. Afterwards, I describe the methods used to obtain the empirical data, and related relevant considerations. The fourth chapter introduces the theoretical framework, describing the decolonial approach more concretely, and explaining the theories on transition/transformation discourses and Post-Development. Following this, an 'analytical groundwork' chapter will present a comprehensive overview of Degrowth and Ubuntu. Focusing firstly on theorization, before looking at how theory translates into practice. Analyzing the philosophies comparatively in the next chapter, to present their commonalities and differences, will explain why a connection of the philosophies is justified

⁷ Throughout the thesis I will describe Ubuntu and Degrowth as philosophies to make it possible to talk about them comparatively, even though other descriptions might also be appropriate for either: for example, a way of life for Ubuntu, and movement or concept for Degrowth.

and beneficial. I follow my analysis by illustrating how an engagement with other knowledges could be pursued – beyond merely acknowledging their existence – by emphasizing the situatedness of knowledge and approaching it from a decolonial perspective. The conclusion summarizes the results.

2. Background

In this chapter I outline the essential background information for this thesis: Firstly, how the manifold problems which we are facing cannot be addressed and solved individually but demand an integrated approach that is directed towards root causes. Secondly, I present shortly the two philosophies Degrowth and Ubuntu, which I am scrutinizing in this paper as being parts of a possible solution. Lastly, I will describe how different knowledges, such as the ones underlying Degrowth and Ubuntu, are regarded and valued differently, building the coloniality of knowledge.

2.1 Complex of Problems

In its Agenda 2030, the UN describes our world as being in a “time of immense challenges to sustainable development” (UN General Assembly 2015, 8). They list several social, economic and ecological problems that they are addressing and aim to tackle before 2030. These problems include rising inequalities within and among countries, youth unemployment, more frequent and intense natural disasters, extremism, terrorism and related humanitarian crises. Furthermore, the UN name natural resource depletion and environmental degradation, and end the list by stating that “the survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk” (UN General Assembly 2015, 8). These problems are interdependent and interrelated, demanding a new and integrated approach to be tackled.

The path that led to this situation is long and complex but follows generally from a human desire to grow and develop, stimulated through capitalism (Foster 2002). The inexorable pursuit of nation states to become more powerful, wealthy and developed continues to happen at the expense of nature and people, contributing to the above-mentioned problems. ‘Solutions’ have been insufficient, focusing too much on singular crises, instead of addressing them as one interconnected crisis. One example is the introduction of biofuels which are based on plant material or agricultural residues to tackle Greenhouse gas emissions of fossil fuel production. Biofuels are carbon neutral in their production; However, they are not cost-effective, and cannot be produced in sufficient quantity (Naik et al. 2010). An interconnected approach would address and try to mitigate the consumption of fossil fuels directly. This would simultaneously mitigate the overly influential position of fossil fuels in political lobbies. Interconnected approaches demand delving deeper, questioning values, ideas and ways of living. This “contemporary conjuncture is best characterized by the fact that *we are facing modern problems for which there are no longer modern solutions*” (Escobar 2016, 15, emphasis in original).

The need for change that goes deeper, a systemic transformation, can be illustrated through the emergence of different transition discourses, which aim at providing alternative pathways to human well-being; ways that are not based on the exploitation of nature or people. Transition discourses want to cross institutional and epistemic boundaries and approach this process either from within dominant ways of thinking and knowing, or from spaces beyond. One approach that is coming from within is Degrowth, and one that is borne in a space beyond is Ubuntu.

2.2 Alternative Knowledges: Degrowth/Ubuntu

In the following section I briefly outline some basic ideas inherent to Degrowth and Ubuntu, which will be explained in more detail in chapter five.

2.2.1 Ubuntu

Ubuntu can be described as a life philosophy or worldview from South Africa, believed to have emanated in specifically the area of amaZulu (Makoba 2016). According to Ubuntu there is a need, or even more a condition for human living, to enhance the life of others, be they human or non-human, in order to become a human being oneself: The isiXhosa expression ‘Umuntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu’ translates into “*A person is a person through other persons*, [and] is the motto of Ubuntu”, says Ramose (Ramose 2015b, 212, emphasis in original). He describes further that Ubuntu “is anchored on the ethical principle of the promotion of life through mutual concern, care and sharing between and among human beings as well as with the wider environment [...]. Ubuntu philosophy understands life in its wholeness” (212).

In Bantu languages, such as isiXhosa, the prefix ‘ubu’ describes the idea of being in general, whereas ‘ntu’ is the noun stem of person. ‘Ubu’ is thereby always oriented towards ‘ntu’, the being is oriented to manifesting itself in a concrete form of existence, the person. They are mutually establishing because they are “two aspects of being as a oneness and an indivisible whole-ness”, making ubuntu “the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu-speaking people” (Ramose 2001); Ubuntu combines the general being and the individual person in one word, thereby indicating the interdependence of the individual to beings around him. The philosophy is found in many Sub-Saharan languages, but it is not referred to under the same name. It can be found under phonological variants in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola (Kamwangamalu 1999).

2.2.2 Degrowth

The term ‘D croissance’ (French for Degrowth) was coined by the French intellectual Andr  Gorz back in 1972, when he posed the following question: “Is the earth’s balance, for which no-growth – or even degrowth – of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?” (Gorz 1972, iv). This remains the central question within Degrowth today.

According to Kallis et al. (2015), Degrowth describes in its most essential sense a critique of growth and demands the abolishment of the growth imperative. Furthermore, it promotes a direction, towards a society which uses less natural resources, with a different way of organizing and living. This imagined society should be built on values such as sharing and simplicity, caring and conviviality. Even though a smaller productive metabolism is crucial, it is not the end goal in itself. More importantly, it is differently structured and serves new functions: “In a degrowth society everything will be different: different activities, different forms and uses of energy, different relations, different gender roles, different allocations of time between paid and nonpaid work, different relations with the non-human world” (Kallis et al. 2015, 5).

In general, Degrowth can be described as an umbrella term, which offers a frame that connects diverse ideas, concepts and practices, and combines a set of different actors ranging from activists, academics, policy makers and practitioners (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2016). The term itself is a deliberately subversive slogan: Not every sector of society needs to ‘degrow’; Some sectors, such as education, medical care or renewable energy, will have to flourish in the future. Others, such as fossil fuel industries or the economic sector, shall shrink.

2.2.3 Critiques

Degrowth as well as Ubuntu have faced different critiques. For Degrowth it has been pointed out that the name ‘Degrowth’ is too subversive, and too deterrent to attract a higher number of people (van den Bergh 2011). It furthermore has been described as being Eurocentric and anthropocentric, and also too theoretical (Ziai 2014). Ubuntu on the other hand has faced critique for being theoretically too vague, and in its practice to reinforce patriarchal social relations and reproduce gender roles (Keevy 2011). Essentially, I acknowledge that both suffer weaknesses when the idealized theories are translated to practice, but this will not be the focus of this essay, since I am approaching this from a more philosophical stance and the aim is not to overcome specific shortcomings. However, a connection should certainly entail mitigating either’s limitations. Therefore, it must be pointed out that both are constantly evolving, and a connection could be part of this evolution.

Connecting Degrowth and Ubuntu is however challenging in different ways. For once because the two are differently grounded and articulated (which will be shown in more detail in chapter 5). Also, the two are differently situated along an epistemic and ontological axis. Degrowth is borne within a Eurocentric knowledge space, whilst Ubuntu emerged in Southern African rural communities. They therefore represent different positions along this axis, which makes them relevant in the context of coloniality of knowledge.

2.3 Coloniality of Knowledge

“To speak of the coloniality of knowledge is to recognize that colonial domination has an epistemic dimension and that epistemic violence is an integral part of the colonial relations of power”, as Burman (2012, 105) puts it. Recognizing this is however difficult because epistemic violence is hidden within the way of Eurocentric knowledge production around the world (Suárez-Krabbe 2012).

“Epistemology refers to how we make knowledge” (Dillon and Wals 2006, 550); it is thereby describing the way that knowledge is studied, theorized and justified. The different epistemologies depend on what people believe there is to know, their ontology. Ontology can be described as being concerned with “the nature of reality” (Dillon and Wals 2006, 550): the kind of existing things, the conditions of this existence and how they relate to each other.

Whereas the validity of Westernized knowledge was constituted through the categorization of being scientific and rational, other knowledges “are often ignored, caricatured or misrepresented in the Western categories of ‘magic’, ‘witchcraft’, ‘sorcery’, ‘superstition’, ‘primitivism’, ‘savagery’ and ‘animism’” (Nyamnjoh 2015, 255). They are thereby rendered invalid and remain mainly invisible in academia; This made Westernized knowledge superior to any other knowledge and explains how the epistemic violence remains hidden under the mist of validity.

After taking the validity from other forms of knowledges, Westernized knowledge remains the only one to ascribe or deny validity. Validating only itself led to this specific way of creating or passing on knowledge and thereby into the reproducing, continuous cycle of coloniality. One institution that plays a big role in creating knowledge within this circle is the university (Burman 2012). However, the university has certainly a big potential in working against this coloniality, through creating platforms for the expression of subalternized knowledges – which is my intention with this thesis.

The coloniality of knowledge becomes apparent within transition projects. Solutions towards a more sustainable life are usually limited to Westernized ways of thinking, thereby excluding approaches that might be more sustainable. This is leading for example to the unquestioned belief in technological advancement to stop climate change and ‘machine fetishism’, as Hornborg (1992) calls it. Machine fetishism could be seen as an expression of coloniality, challenging this would create spaces for different epistemologies, thereby allowing a more diverse set of solutions to, for instance, problems of sustainability.

3. Applied Methods

The results of this thesis are based on empirical qualitative data conducted through using different methods. My fieldwork was carried out in South Africa, where I spent February and March 2018 with my research partner. The first month was spent in Johannesburg, where I conducted expert

interviews with different scholars on Ubuntu. During the second month we drove through different provinces of South Africa, namely Gauteng, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, where I then observed directly and carried out informal interviews. Afterwards, I conducted one more expert interview in Sweden.

3.1 Expert Interviews

I engaged in semi-structured in-depth expert interviews with five scholars on the topic. Four of them are focused on Ubuntu, one on Degrowth. As I have been working on Degrowth during my studies, engaged in planning the Degrowth conference and am based in a context where Degrowth is present, I felt a bigger need to interview more experts on Ubuntu than Degrowth.

According to Bogner et al. (2009) the expert has specific knowledge that might not be accessible to other people within the field, which is why it is important to get a hold of this knowledge directly from them, and scrutinize it in detail. The interview is usually kept flexible and can be adapted during the interview, if necessary. This reflects the interest in the interviewee's point of view, which is typical for qualitative interviewing (Bryman 2016).

The scholars I interviewed are listed below in table 1. I chose to interview the scholars on Ubuntu for different reasons: They are among the most renowned and active on the topic, they were accessible with my limited resources and mobility, and they all represent a different take on Ubuntu (which will be presented in section 5.1), offering me more nuanced results. My interview questions for every interviewee were open-ended and semi-structured.

Table 1: Expert interviewees (alphabetical order)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Employer/Affiliation</i>	<i>Date of Interview</i>
Chertkovskaya, Ekaterina	Researcher and Lecturer	Political Science	Lund University	10.04.2018
Makoba, Ntokozo	Professor	Public Governance Development	University of KwaZulu-Natal	20.03.2018
Metz, Thaddeus	Professor	Philosophy	University of Johannesburg	20.02.2018
Molefe, Motsamai	Professor	Philosophy	Wits University	01.03.2018
Praeg, Leonhard	Professor	Philosophy	University of Pretoria	28.02.2018

3.2 Direct Observation and informal Interviews

Ubuntu is not a distinctive feature, it is neither visually distinguishable nor to be verbally categorized,⁸ hence I could not plan a specific route to visit communities in which Ubuntu is practiced more than elsewhere. My field work therefore followed the paths of my fellow researcher who worked on a different topic in the same area, mainly in rural and traditional villages, in which Ubuntu is assumed to be more widely practiced. Thus, this allowed me to encounter different areas – from rural to more urbanized ones – and observe directly and have informal interviews with people from different occupations and backgrounds who are facing different livelihoods challenges. This allowed me to observe situations without having to become immersed in the entire context (Trochim and Donnelly 2001). We spent three weeks in several different cities such as Ermelo or Emalahleni and through the research of my partner we furthermore gained access to different communities, informal settlements and townships.

Having conducted theoretically focused, empirical work prior to interviews, my observations made it possible to gain deeper qualitative insights partly based on the perspective of insiders. Spradley (1980) states that there are different dimensions that make the description of a social situation possible, so even though Ubuntu is not a distinctive feature, it was possible for me to make related observations. Some of them which can be put into connection to Ubuntu are for example activities, acts, goals or feelings. Thus, while I did have conversations specifically about Ubuntu as well, my personal observations on the way people behaved, interacted and what they strived for, have been considered for the analysis as well (Kvale 2007).

3.3 Ethical and practical Considerations

When doing research and fieldwork, especially in a different context for me as a researcher, there must be several considerations. There are ethical reflections regarding given power dynamics and hierarchies, and practical limitations arising from language barriers or time and financial constraints. These considerations will be presented in the following.

3.3.1 Positionality

There were and still are certain power dynamics to be recognized and taken into account when I conducted my research. These dynamics are based on the colonial history and in the ongoing coloniality, they reveal through perceptions and effects of class, ethnicity, nationality, culture, language or education (Smith 2012). I paid attention to these dynamics, reminded myself of my privileges and tried to not be influenced by them negatively, therefore I tried representing opinions and inputs as I received them. However, I was an outsider to Ubuntu and the communities I visited. This positionality inevitably influenced my interpretations, perceptions and understandings and thereby the research.

⁸ Which will be explained in more detail in the sections 5.1.1 and 5.2.1.

Coming from Germany, I questioned my position towards writing about Ubuntu, since this, in an ethical and more culturally accurate way should preferably be done by an Ubuntu ‘insider’ (Smith 2012). Nevertheless, I am convinced that Ubuntu deserves to be represented more within academic circles and beyond, and therefore I consider my work on it justified. I do not intend to speak for others, but rather want to broaden the platform of subalternized ways of living and knowing within academia.

3.3.2 Practical Limitations

There were practical limitations to the research, specifically regarding time constraints and language barriers. My time was limited due to financial resources and the university time schedule. Even though I did have sufficient time to organize, prepare and conduct expert interviews, more time could have been helpful to get more practical insights into Ubuntu. It could have for example allowed me to stay longer in certain communities, participate more in people’s daily lives. This would have given me a larger amount of qualitative data to draw on during the analysis.

The language barrier did not feel present, because I engaged mainly with people in English, but knowledge of local languages would have been of advantage. Knowledge of local language might have helped mitigate some effects of the above-mentioned positionality and allow me to interact with people more personally. Furthermore, speaking a Bantu language would have helped me to understand the philosophy of Ubuntu more holistically, since parts of it might be framed differently when translated to English.

4. Theoretical Framework

I will now present the theoretical framework of the thesis. After having described the coloniality of knowledge and the purpose of this thesis as working against this coloniality, a decolonial approach as an underlying critical theory is necessary. This will be presented at first, including two relevant concepts: Situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) and Geopolitics of knowledge (Dussel 1977); followed by a section on transition/transformation discourses, describing an approach towards tackling the earlier presented interconnected crisis. Finally, I present the theory of Post-Development, which on the one hand critiques the Development imperative, and on the other hand presents a destination for a societal transition, namely an era in which this imperative has been overcome.

4.1 Critical Theory of Science: Decolonial Theory

Even though the time of global physical colonialism is generally regarded as over, and with it the physical domination and occupation of some nations through others,⁹ one can still detect

⁹ Generally, this is the accepted view, but it is certainly debatable. Counter examples would be Hawaii or the American Virgin Islands, which are still regarded as being colonized by many people.

corresponding power relations that are based on this era on different levels. The remaining legacies on social, economic, environmental and cultural levels are reproductions of the imbalanced power relations under colonialism and can therefore be described as coloniality. According to Quijano (2007) coloniality outlived colonialism.

Nowadays, power relations are most often not as obvious, yet they are certainly still present, and they continue to follow along the same axis as they did during colonialism. Quijano (2007, 169–170) argues that;

if we observe the main lines of exploitation and social domination on a global scale, the main lines of world power today, and the distribution of resources and work among the world population, it is very clear that the large majority of the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are precisely the members of [...] the colonized populations.

Following a similar trail of critique, Escobar (2007) argues that coloniality functions furthermore in a constitutive way for modernity, meaning that some places on earth can only be modern if others are colonial. This entails the subalternization of knowledges and cultures which are different to the dominant, thereby excluding subalternized people from official and intellectual discourses (Spivak 1988).

De-colonial theories aim to “liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity” (Quijano 2007, 177). I intend to participate in and contribute to this process with this thesis, by attempting to understand and engage in a different culture and by promoting acknowledgment and respect towards it in my home. This is however limited through my own position, as already acknowledged in my ethical considerations.

Situated Knowledges and the Geopolitics of Knowledge

One concept that is of relevance in Decolonizing work is the concept of ‘situated knowledges’ by Haraway (1988), which is borne out of feminist studies and the questioning of scientific claims towards objectivity. She argues that all scientific knowledge is contextual and must be seen in relation to the social and economic conditions, the language and the cultural values, from which it stems; Knowledge therefore, can never be objective and representative for everyone. She differentiates in knowledge from ‘unmarked bodies’, namely the ones who are part of the majority of a given society and therefore considered the norm, or the neutral, and from ‘marked bodies’, which are less neutral, for example women, members of the LGBTQI community, people of color or religious minorities. The knowledge of ‘marked bodies’ can only be the one of *one* person, whereas ‘unmarked’ knowledge can be dissociated from its body and become scientific. “Objectivity [...] [is] about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway 1988, 582).

The term 'geopolitics of knowledge' was coined by Dussel (1977) and emerged as a concept from the decolonial framework, arguing as well that knowledge is grounded and influenced by contexts, and it therewith "denounces the fallacy and aberration of one geo-political location with the pretence to universality" (Mignolo 2016, 176) and "unveils the power differential between geopolitical locations of languages, institutions, and actors" (Mignolo 2016, 177). Geopolitics of knowledge differs from Haraway's situated knowledges in its bigger focus on the difference, the irreducible colonial difference, between knowledge that is situated in the Third World and knowledge situated in the First World (Mignolo 2002). The assumption that knowledge, in its understanding as being universal, is "floating above the geo-historical formation of the colonial matrix of power is [...] very imperial" (Mignolo 2016, 175). Knowledges stem from within epistemic locations and are therefore much influenced by geopolitics and the power relations connected to those specific locations. This, then creates and aligns with the coloniality of knowledge: The value of knowledges is influenced by the geopolitical power connected to the location where a knowledge originates and how those in power perceive this location. Decolonization is crucial for a more just world, and thereby an essential element of transition discourses.

4.2 Transition/Transformation Discourses

As it has been indicated earlier, the world is facing manifold crises, which are all complexly intertwined. This entanglement is the critical point within transition discourses. As point of departure transition discourses take "the notion that the contemporary ecological and social crises are inseparable from the model of social life that has become dominant" (Escobar 2015, 452). They are based in the assumption that the attempts at solving these crises so far have failed to alter global development sustainably in a positive way and therefore "envision a radical transformation" (Escobar 2015, 452). They want to shift given paradigms. For this it is necessary to fundamentally question central economic and political institutions (Narberhaus, Sheppard 2015). Eventually, this transition leads "from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing" (Berry 1999, 11).

Two factors are crucial for such a transformation. Firstly, transition needs to be a common undertaking for major agents of change from all over the world. Secondly, transition needs to address the intangible, which according to Raskin et al. (2002, x) is; "the critical underlying element – wide public awareness of the need for change and the spread of values that underscore quality of life, human solidarity and environmental sustainability". Thus, beyond focusing on tangible goals such as policies or behaviors, it needs a deep cultural shift in value and attitudes (Narberhaus and Sheppard 2015). Escobar (2015, 454) builds on this by arguing that transition

discourses not only bring to the fore a “need to reconnect with each other [but also] with the nonhuman world”.

Escobar (2015) further stresses the need for transition concepts of the Global South and the Global North to connect to each other. However, so far there has not been a sufficient effort in bringing discourses from different geographies together into a mutually enriching dialogue. If transition discourses have a departure point, they necessarily have a point of destination: One possibility could be a Post-Development world.

4.3 Post-Development and the Pluriverse

In 1992, Sachs (1) stated that “the time [was] ripe to write [Development’s] obituary”. He brought forward the need for a “post-developmental era” (1992, 4) to overcome the constraints that have been put on the world by the earlier mentioned pursuit of Development. Instead of presenting one possible path towards economically stable and socially fair nations, Development dominated the way in that social reality was conceptualized, namely along an axis of undeveloped towards developed - “Development had achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary” (Escobar 1995, 5).

This axis translated directly into a hierarchy between different countries and ways of living, with the aim of transforming¹⁰ underdeveloped into developed countries – which, as we see today, has not happened but remains to be pursued. Throughout its history Development got remade, adapted and reconfigured, put into new dresses such as Sustainable Development or Green Economics, which are presented as a better version, but then “once again gets mired in crisis shortly afterwards” (Gudynas 2013, 28). Thus, this ‘greenwashing’ of Development is merely leading to false solutions (Demaria and Kothari 2017).

The objective of Post-Development is to reveal and thereby unmake the power relations created through the Development imperative and the Eurocentrism that becomes particularly obvious regarding knowledge systems and ways of living. It aims at displacing the Development imperative as the epicenter of human life. Post-Development is therefore a radical critique that can be used to scrutinize those ideological foundations, but it is not “obliged to propose “another development”, as Gudynas (2013, 29) argues: “Instead, it enables questions to be posed where other schools of thought are not able to, and thus opens the door to new types of alternatives”.

¹⁰ Transforming is still a rather gracious choice of wording, the initial idea of this ‘transformation’ was ruthless: “There is a sense in which rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of cast, creed and race have to burst; and large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated” (United Nations, Department of Social and Economic Affairs 1951, 15; quoted after Escobar 1995, 4).

One term that has recently found recognition in the context of Post-Development is the pluriverse. It has been promoted in and connected to social sciences by the prominent modernity/coloniality thinker Walter D. Mignolo for almost two decades now.¹¹ It has furthermore been taken up to summarize a world in which several different alternative pathways to human well-being than Development are possible – ‘a world where many worlds fit’, as the Mexican Zapatistas formulate.

The pluriverse is opposed to the One-World world (Law 2015): A world in which the euro-modern way of life, and its inherent capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, and patriarchal worldview, is dominant and which has appropriated the status as the “right” world while subjecting other ways of living to non-existence. Since this One-World world way of life is mainly responsible for the major crises nowadays, the pluriverse strives towards its opposite: A world, that contains multiple worlds, multiple ontologies and ways of being in the world (Escobar 2016), such as Degrowth or Ubuntu.

The pluriverse not only allows for different worldviews, but within and through it the relationality of life is emphasized. It is a “a process of planetarization articulated around a vision of the Earth as a living whole that is always emerging out of the manifold biophysical, human and spiritual elements and relations that make it up” (Escobar 2011, 139). Pluriverses are therefore convivial and plurilogical. Western modern cosmovision, the basis of the One-World world is one of many cosmovisions, just one local history with a global design (Mignolo 2000). Two out of these cosmovisions are represented in this thesis through Degrowth and Ubuntu. However, before scrutinizing them in regard to an imagined post-developmental pluriverse, they will have to be examined in more detail.

5. Illustrating Ubuntu and Degrowth

If one searches for Ubuntu philosophy on google.scholar, there are around 25.000 results. The computer program Ubuntu Linux, which is named after the philosophy brings around 67.000 results. On the other hand, often, when the term Degrowth comes up people think about an economic recession or the reduction of GDP. Thus, it seems appropriate to give a more comprehensive description of Degrowth and Ubuntu to establish a basis for the analysis. The first part will analyze how either philosophy is theorized and presented academically, the second part will focus on either philosophy’s practices.

5.1 Theorization

Firstly, Ubuntu, which is neither outspoken nor transferred in writing among generations, will be theoretically framed. Afterwards, Degrowth, which summarizes a whole range of different theoretical approaches, will be presented.

¹¹ For example in Mignolo 2000 or Mignolo 2011.

5.1.1 Articulating the Unexpressed: Ubuntu

As mentioned earlier, Ubuntu can be described as a life philosophy from South Africa with a high value on communal living. During the interview, Metz (20.02.2018) explained that Ubuntu has three different meanings: Firstly, Ubuntu is a human quality or a character trait, which a human can possess. This human quality inspires, secondly, a way of life or a culture. These two meanings are present on the ground, practiced and noticeable and inform the third meaning: Ubuntu as a worldview, a philosophy of life. Praeg (2014) has coined the academically recognized distinction between the two levels in ubuntu (initial lower case 'u') and Ubuntu (upper case 'U'). The former describes similarly the lived practice and habitus of communal values, the first and second meaning, whereas the latter describes its third articulation as a philosophy (Praeg 28.02.2018).

Makoba (20.03.2018) refers to ubuntu (lower case) when she says that;

ubuntu is humanity. But much more than that—it is knowing that you are not important. It's about knowing that every person that you meet is important. It's about being humble, about giving the other person space, space to live and to be comfortable. It's about a lot of things. It's about listening and hearing the other person and making sure you do not force your opinion on others. It's also about respecting the environment, the animals, the trees and everything else.

Even though there is a range of literature which is attempting to describe conclusively or at least frame Ubuntu,¹² or how Ubuntu could be utilized within different concepts such as the Capability approach,¹³ “it is not an articulated theoretical, philosophical worldview” (Praeg 28.02.2018). It is not based on theories, it is much rather based in traditional values, beliefs and practices which are learnt while growing-up (Saule 1998). They are accordingly not “innate, but rather acquired in society and transmitted from one generation to the next by means of oral genres such as fables, proverbs, myths, riddles and storytelling” (Kamwangamalu 1999, 27).

Despite being not articulated, Ubuntu (upper case 'U') is the basis for an active field of philosophy. Molefe (01.03.2018) clarified that there are four different dominant frameworks to interpret Ubuntu on a philosophical level. Praeg (2017) states that each of these interpretations combine a certain image of thought with certain suppositions about the meaning of being African. Molefe regards Ubuntu as a means to self-realization: the individual aims towards becoming the best human being through communing with others. This interpretation levels the importance of individual and community, stating that the individual follows its own goals, which align with the ones of the community. The second interpretation frames Ubuntu as a critical humanism, which is represented for example by Leonhard Praeg. This interpretation puts value on the political implications of Ubuntu; questioning for example why it only appeared on the academic agenda about 30 years ago, even though the oldest written text about it is from 1846 (Gade 2011). The third framework is represented for example by Thaddeus Metz, who argued (20.02.2018) that the

¹² See for example Praeg 2008 or Gade 2013.

¹³ See for instance Hoffmann, Metz 2017 or Rapatsa 2016.

essence of Ubuntu is the relationship, with harmony created through engaging in relationships as the goal of Ubuntu. The fourth and most recent one is the cosmopolitan framework, which compares Ubuntu with other forms of communitarianism in the world, thereby trying to make it more tangible in mainstream philosophical discourse (Molefe 01.03.2018).¹⁴

As I have shown, there is no conclusive and clear definition for Ubuntu. Even though it is generally perceived positively, this lack of a clear definition has been criticized and it has been argued that it cannot be applied in a contemporary modernized world (Bennett 2011). For Praeg this inexplicability derives exactly from the dialectic between the contemporary modernized world and the local tradition. He (28.02.2018) argued that this dialectic renders Ubuntu a “glocal phenomenon, which is messy, not clearly distinct – it is not possible to define where one ends and the other begins”. Elsewhere, he explains in other words;

to call Ubuntu a glocal phenomenon means recognising that global discourses (Christianity, Human rights and so on) give a particular expression to the meaning of local traditions such as Ubuntu, but in a way that also allows the resulting Ubuntu to feed back into the global discourse as a locally based critique and expansion of those very discourses (Praeg 2014, 37).

As it is outspoken and mainly expressed through practices, Ubuntu leaves many possibilities to interpret it theoretically. Presenting a large range of theoretical entry points, but less open to interpretation is Degrowth.

5.1.2 A Plethora of Theory: Degrowth

As shortly stated above, Degrowth can be described as an umbrella term which gathers different actors that are critiquing the existing imperative of economic growth within society and promotes a range of practical and theoretical alternatives striving towards ecological sustainability and social justice (Chertkovskaya, Paulsson 2016). It promotes an intertwined cultural and political change, thereby making it a radical philosophy (Kallis 2011). For Kallis (2017,12, emphases added), Degrowth;

denotes an *intentional* process of a smooth and “prosperous way down”, through a range of social, environmental, and economic policies and institutions, *orchestrated* to guarantee that while production and consumption decline, human welfare improves and is more equally distributed.

It is accordingly a consciously planned idea which is reactive to specific existing ills. Degrowth actors include social movements, academic scholars, activists, policy makers and practitioners.

Flipo (2007, quoted after Demaria et al. 2013) names five Degrowth ‘sources’ that indicate these ills: Firstly, Ecology, entailing human pressure on eco systems and nature; Secondly, the hegemonic imaginary of Development and Utilitarianism, which is criticizing the uniformization of cultures and the view of the human as an economic agent; Thirdly, Meaning of Life, describing the need for another meaning to life than to take part in the commercial consumption cycle;

¹⁴ A more thorough analysis of these frameworks is at this point not possible and not of priority. For further reading I would recommend Praeg 2017.

Fourthly, Bioeconomics, which are stressing the risk of over using natural resources and sinks, thereby harming the natural balance; Fifthly, Democracy, calling for a deepening of democratic processes regarding economic development, growth or technological innovation; Demaria et al. (2013) added furthermore sixthly, Justice, to these sources, demanding to degrow inequalities.

These ills have been academically recognized and theorized, they are deviated from and manifest themselves in different concepts, that are presenting and explaining the connections between cause and effect. D'Alisa et al. (2015, xxi) describe these concepts as the “core of degrowth’s critique”. Some of these concepts are for example the critique towards capitalism or commodification, the description of the undervaluation of care or the shortcomings of GDP as a measurement for human development. These concepts are well-founded and empirically supported, however they might still be contested. Based in these concepts are certain practices, institutional proposals and ways of living Degrowth.

Degrowth promoters envision and work towards a future in which societies have displaced the growth imperative, and instead focus on sufficiency. These “societies live within their ecological means, with localized economies, which distribute resources more equally through new forms of democratic institutions. [...] The organizing principles will be simplicity, conviviality, and sharing” (Kallis 2017, 12).

5.2 From Theory to Practice

Inseparable from the theoretical foundations are practices for Degrowth and Ubuntu. Whereas Ubuntu’s practices in the first place led to its theorization, Degrowth practices are on the one hand inspiring theory, whilst on the other theory has led directly to specific practices. In this section I present some of these practices.

5.2.1 From sharing Food to appealing to Spirits: Ubuntu

Praeg (28.02.2018) stated that I would find people surprisingly inarticulate in response to the question ‘What is Ubuntu?’. This was indeed very noticeable during my observations and conversations, I did not receive well-rounded descriptions but very practical and mundane examples. This can be explained through the fact that Ubuntu is not learnt through theory, but through practical socialization. Molefe (01.03.2018) described “Ubuntu as a quality that you have developed, a quality that you can achieve”. However, since it is not articulated, certain actions are also not aimed specifically at increasing one’s own human quality, one’s Ubuntu. They are performed, because it was learnt that they are right, because it “is just what we do” (Praeg 28.02.2018), “it is just part of who we are” (Makoba 20.03.2018).

The most common articulation of Ubuntu which I have experienced was through the term respect. Ubuntu is about respecting everyone you meet, regardless of who they are or what they do – they are humans, and as those they have and deserve dignity. The examples of how this respect is

shown and substantiated – how one develops one’s own Ubuntu – are widely ranged and different. Some examples that I have been given were the following: Ubuntu is if your neighbor doesn’t have food, you would share your own; generally sharing what one possesses; to listen to elderly people, and to help them with any task; to take responsibility for children, even if they are not one’s own; to take decisions that affect other people communally; to forgive and not be provoked; and to be honest and humble. I observed these practices in communities I visited during my field trip.

Ubuntu also puts a high value on spirituality. This involves the ritualization of communal engagements. People appeal to ancestral spirits before they take important decisions and these spirits are honored during specific ceremonies such as weddings or funerals. Makoba (20.03.2018) explained that a person is always accompanied by his/her ancestors, whom need to be respected as well. Metz (20.02.2018) confirmed this importance of the spiritual elements, even though for him they are rather representations of what is important within African¹⁵ communities, namely the close bonds to family and community (who will accompany a person as ancestral spirits).

If one tries to take away these metaphysical underpinnings, Ubuntu becomes secular and thereby incomplete. This is what Praeg means, when he (28.02.2018) states this about urbanization: “What happens with urbanization is that the ontological bottom falls out”. This means that people are losing their sense of space and belonging to a community within cities, and that accordingly their practices change. The city does not leave space for ancestors, one is not as closely connected with one’s surrounding and neighbors as within a community. This process of eroding Ubuntu through urbanization goes hand in hand with modernization, because the city individualizes people (Praeg 28.02.2018). This happens exemplary through the almost inevitable integration in the job market, about which Molefe (01.03.2018) argues that it is eroding Ubuntu, since it accounts people as individual economic agents, and not as social and communal beings. During one conversation I was told that Ubuntu was by now merely a myth, that people were only striving towards material values and not after a functioning community. Another factor, which has been named to be weakening Ubuntu is the South African constitution: Its focus on individual rights does not represent the communal ways that are promoted through Ubuntu.¹⁶

This feedback opens the question whether Ubuntu is still of high practical relevance in South Africa. Personally, I did observe acts which represented Ubuntu as well as acts which went against

¹⁵ Even though I wish to avoid using binaries such as ‘Western’ and ‘African’, here I am presenting Metz’s opinion, and therefore use his wording. He put forth an argument in favour of the careful usage, justifying the usage of ‘African’ if something is salient within the African continent. More about this in his article: Metz 2015.

¹⁶ This contradiction has also found academic attention: Keevy (2011) for example is regarding Ubuntu very critically in that respect. He argues that the collective worldview of Ubuntu does not conform with the protection of individual rights, due to Ubuntu entailing a patriarchal hierarchy and discrimination of women (52). It therewith goes along the main criticism towards Ubuntu as being patriarchal. There is however a need for more critical research on these contradictions.

it. It can neither said to be dead nor to be practiced constantly everywhere. However, throughout my observation, every South African I engaged with knew about Ubuntu, and they all deemed it positively (regardless of whether they believed it existed or not). So, as Metz (20.02.2018) put it, it still has residence – there is still a common cultural understanding of Ubuntu. A big number of organizations are explicitly using this understanding in their names, thereby trying to promote the restoration and reassertion of Ubuntu towards younger people and modern life. For example, the ZipZap circus school, which teaches young children from townships artistic and practical skills, has an Ubuntu outreach program, which is addressing HIV-positive children;¹⁷ and the UbuntuYouth project, which provides educational and life-skills in an after-school program.¹⁸ The usage might risk the co-optation of the philosophy but can still be seen as symbolic for Ubuntu's widely spread cultural understanding. Contrarily to Ubuntu's position as a way of life, which is threatened to be slowly eroding, is Degrowth's position as slowly gaining more and more ground.¹⁹

5.2.2 From Theory to Practice and Vice Versa: Degrowth

As mentioned earlier, Degrowth envisions localized economies, more equally distributed resources, based on principles such as simplicity, conviviality and sharing. It is possible to summarize a range of different practices under this umbrella vision, which have different focuses, but are–on these different paths–collectively converging towards a Degrowth future. Here it needs to be mentioned that not all the practices started with having a Degrowth 'identity' but have been summarized within the Degrowth philosophy afterwards. Also, whilst some of these practices are based on a theoretical grounding, others have reversely influenced theory.

D'Alisa et al. (2015) provide a summary of projects and policies representing the practical “post-capitalist imaginary of Degrowth” (xxi). Projects of activists are for example the back-to-the-landers, Eco-communities or Work-sharing. Back-to-the-landers describe people without an agrarian background who are moving from cities to the countryside to adopt an agrarian lifestyle. They aim to live simpler lives, independent of wage labor and the market, thereby creating a space outside capitalism for themselves, with a closer connection to nature (Calvário and Otero 2015). In Eco-communities, people live together according to ecological principles, with a focus on sustainable lifestyles, direct democracy and autonomy. The communities tend to be small (<100 people), and the inhabitants usually practice some kind of small scale agriculture, craft production or self-construction (Cattaneo 2015). In an imagined 'degrown' society the production output is not as high as today and technological innovations could take over some human labor as well,

¹⁷ Find more information on <http://www.zip-zap.co.za/>.

¹⁸ More information on their website <https://www.ubuntu youth.org/>.

¹⁹ There will for example be a degrowth & post-growth conference at the EU Parliament in September 2018. See <http://www.postgrowth2018.eu/>.

which leads to a decline in needed working hours. This reduction is distributed among people, so that a group of people works less instead of one person being unemployed (Schor 2015).

Policies which are connotated with the Degrowth vision are for example a basic and maximum income or a job guarantee. The imaginary of Degrowth will have to face poverty problems straighter, because eliminating poverty through growth will not be a solution. Therefore, the wealth would have to be distributed more equally, for which a basic and a maximum income could help (Alexander 2015). A policy for a job guarantee could furthermore help avoid unemployment. This guarantee, orchestrated by governments, would promise jobs to any qualified person seeking employment, thereby also tackling problems related to unemployment such as crime, domestic violence or discrimination (Unti 2015).

Despite these collective and intentional practices, Degrowth also aims at inspiring daily practices, to live more sustainably and inter-relational, as for example through promoting to not fly or living with principles of sharing and borrowing basic items, instead of buying them. After having introduced Ubuntu, this approach towards daily situations sounds very familiar. The next chapter looks at these familiarities in more detail.

6. Comparative Analysis

Based on the presented theorization and practices of Ubuntu and Degrowth, in the following chapter I analyze both philosophies towards a possible connection. I firstly compare them to point out their similarities, before describing how and why a connection is necessary and beneficial.

6.1 Comparison

Degrowth and Ubuntu might be very differently theorized and grounded, with Ubuntu being a traditional way of life, which emerged and existed throughout potentially centuries, and Degrowth being a reactive idea, which aims to overcome crises by finding alternative ways of living, but it can be argued that they have valuable commonalities.

As Praeg (28.02.2018) argued, neither Ubuntu nor Degrowth is unique, or its meaning entirely singular – “if you break it down, the core values are the same”. Both philosophies advocate a communal way of living, respecting the people around you and to be aware of the global population. They promote conviviality, living in solidarity with others, and value the interest of other people because their well-being defines one’s own well-being. These values demand a mindset which does not prioritize individual interests over the community’s interest.

Similarly shared to these core values are forces that are opposing Ubuntu and Degrowth. Given their different grounding, these opposing forces can be regarded differently from either philosophy’s position. Whereas factors such as the individualization through modernity, the economization of humans as economic actors or the disconnection of human and nature through,

among others, urbanization, for Degrowth present problems that are to be overcome; for Ubuntu, they are hindering further flourishing and cause the erosion of the lived philosophy. Regardless of their positions towards it, it can be argued that Ubuntu and Degrowth therefore have a common enemy.

Emerging from the shared values are practices that are similar. One story, that Makoba (20.03.2018) told me about a community she visited, was about a vendee that needed a certain amount of potatoes and requested it from a farmer. Instead of providing all the potatoes herself, the farmer asked other farmers to participate in the provision in order to share the benefits from the big request. Generally, Ubuntu is easier practiced in small scale communities (Praeg 28.02.2018), which allow a deeper connection to other people and the environment, a communal lifestyle that promotes compassion and solidarity. This too, is one of the imaginaries of Degrowth, promoting Eco-communities or shared work—just as the farmer practiced it.

The similarities between Degrowth and Ubuntu have shown the grounds to build connections between them. A view, which my interviewees held as well. For once Metz (20.02.2018), who stated the following;

I think that Ubuntu is a natural way to support a Degrowth program, that sounds right to me. If the focus is to reduce production and consumption, or to at least steer the goal of production and consumption towards enhancing relationships instead of keeping us isolated; And if we furthermore say we want to decrease the grossly unequal distribution of wealth, that animals and nature deserve respect, and that we care for future generations. *All those things grow out of any plausible interpretation of Ubuntu - any interpretation would support these kinds of things.*

And Praeg (28.02.2018), who stated it even more concretely;

Ubuntu has an untapped radical potential, because it does prioritize community over the individual's claim to rights. It can be invoked more readily and persistently to close the socio-economic gap. That is an obvious connection to Degrowth, because it requires that we eliminate the inequality.

Thus, even though Degrowth and Ubuntu are different, it becomes apparent why Degrowth scholars refer to Ubuntu as a natural alliance (Kallis 2017; D'Alisa et al. 2015).

Example: Environmental Sustainability

The potential for being alliances despite differences can be exemplified through the pursuit of environmental sustainability. As stated earlier, ecology and with it the question of environmental sustainability is one of the roots of the Degrowth philosophy. Degrowth criticizes the exploitation and commodification of natural resources, or unquestioned development and the dogmatic pursuit of growth at the expense of nature and animals. In an envisioned Degrowth society humans not only live within ecological limits, but they are furthermore (re-)connected with their natural environment, and nature is perceived to have an intrinsic value independent of its ability to provide useful resources and services (Demaria et al. 2013). This reconnection is actively

pursued through for example the mentioned Eco-communities, and sustainability is of high relevance in any policy, action or practice related to Degrowth.

Through Ubuntu, environmental sustainability is approached differently, and it is once again not outspoken as such. During one informal conversation whilst in South Africa, a pastor told me that Ubuntu for him also means, to look after one's environment because it is a shared place for everybody to enjoy – if you see someone litter or somehow pollute the environment, it is one's responsibility to make that person aware of his wrong doing, towards the environment and towards the community. LenkaBula (2008) explains that Ubuntu does however also go beyond this rather anthropocentric view. She states that people feel interconnected with the earth, which is “encapsulated in the practices and rituals of many African communities. [...] From conception till adulthood, people are taught to nurture and honour their relationships with other human beings and other creatures of the earth” (2008, 386). This is underlined by Ramose (2015a), who argues that the importance of a human being can not solely be explained through her relation to other humans but to the physical nature as well. The principle of wholeness, namely that “neither the single individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purposes without recognising their mutual foundedness; their complementarity” (2015a, 70), is also applicable to the relation between human and nature, thereby rendering them interdependent. Ramose (2015a, 70) continues that, “moreover, human beings are indeed part and parcel of physical nature even though they might be a privileged part [...]. Caring for one another is the fulfilment of the natural duty to care for physical nature as well”. This can be interpreted as a form of environmental sustainability.

This interdependence was apparent during my field work as well. In a conversation about displacement by coal mines, it was explained that for rural South Africans the most important entity is their land. It is where they are producing their goods, where they live closely with their families and where they relate to their ancestry, where they originate. As it has been explained earlier, this metaphysical connection is of high importance, it was one of the main reasons to be against coal induced misplacement, and thereby against coal mining more broadly, since the mines are destroying this connection. This example shows how Degrowth and Ubuntu are pursuing similar goals, even though they are based in different ontologies and are therefore differently formulated and construed.

There are two concepts which are worth mentioning in this context. Firstly, there is the ‘deep ecology movement’ inspired by Naess (1994). He coined the term *ecosophies*, describing “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium”; Ecosophies “will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only ‘facts’ of pollution, resources, population etc. but also value priorities” (Naess 1994, 124). Le Grange (2017) argued that Ubuntu represents such an ecosophy. The deep ecology movement, according to Naess (1994), would then combine different

ecosophies into a set of principles that recognize the intrinsic value of all organisms; This, crucially, is possible despite differences among the philosophies. Moreover, “when philosophies are deeply embodied by individuals and embedded in communities, and are aligned with platform principles shared by society more broadly, then fundamental change is more likely to occur” (Le Grange 2017, 307).

The second concept is Spivak’s ‘strategic essentialism’ (1987). While emphasizing that essentialist categories of human identity should be criticized, one sometimes must use these categories to make sense of the world. She furthermore proposed “a strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak 1987, 205). Spivak intended the strategy of essentializing to be helpful for minority groups to affirm political identity, for example essentializing women in a fight for the equal rights of women. However, in this context it could be stretched, with the idea to strategically essentialize environmental interests into one consensus, even though the interests are differently grounded. Both these concepts reaffirm the usefulness of connecting towards specific goals, in this case connecting Degrowth and Ubuntu for a common strategy towards environmental sustainability. To be able to establish a common strategy is one core advantage of a connection, but not the only one. The next chapter will discuss further needs for a connection.

6.2 Connection

As stated earlier, the pluriverse is an imagination of a world, in which different knowledge systems and development alternatives, different pathways to well-being, co-exist. However, in the interconnected space that is our world today, simply coexisting is not enough. Given the hierarchical structures and the common crises, there is a need to create an interconnected network, synergetic alliances, between globally spread actors in the North and South (Ciplet et al. 2015; Raskin 2016).

As stated, Ubuntu and Degrowth have been distinguished as possible alliances already, and Degrowth scholars are promoting more and more the importance of acknowledging, connecting to and conversing with alternative philosophies from around the world. The most eminent and researched alliances in this regard have been between Degrowth and the Latin American *Buen Vivir*, and Degrowth and the Indian *Ecological Swaraj*. *Buen Vivir* is a concept based on different variants of indigenous ideas about human well-being which states an alternative to development (Beling et al. 2018). *Ecological Swaraj* presents a framework based in the grassroots that promotes and respects ecological limits and the rights of other species, while pursuing social justice and equity through strong democracy and a holistic vision of human well-being (Demaria and Kothari 2017). Chertkovskaya (10.04.2018) argued however, that the work on and the process of connecting Degrowth to other philosophies has not yet had a sufficient depth, that it remained rather superficial. I agree with her on that: So far, there has merely been acknowledgement of

other knowledges, and some work has been done on how different knowledges can complement each other (Beling et al. 2018; Escobar 2015). But a more thorough engagement and a deeper intellectual involvement in other ways of knowing is still lacking.

Escobar (2015, 456) explains a starting point to approach alliance building, namely that it is crucial;

to resist falling into the trap, from northern perspectives, of thinking that while the North needs 'degrowth', the South needs 'development'. Conversely, from southern perspectives, it is important to avoid the fallacy that degrowth is "ok for the North", but that the South needs rapid growth.

As mentioned earlier already, this fallacy has become apparent during my field work as well (through for example the increased pursuit of individual material values instead of communal ones): the development imperative is mitigating the practice of Ubuntu in South Africa and its alternative pathway to well-being. Along the same lines is an argument of Kallis (2017), namely that Southern alternatives such as Ubuntu "are colonized intellectually by developmentalism and materially through the extractive industries that, in the name of growth, bring destruction and poverty" (Kallis 2017, 158), and "Degrowth in the North [...] can provide space for the flourishing of [these] alternative cosmovisions and practices in the South" (Kallis 2017, 23).

Degrowth is not only applicable in Northern countries, its message is indeed important in for example South Africa. However, when acknowledging this, it is of high importance—it is crucial—to steer clear of approaching this connection only one-sidedly: The phrasing of a Degrowth agenda being necessary to enable Ubuntu to flourish could portray a hierarchical relation between the two, namely a Eurocentric relation in which Ubuntu is situated in a dependent position, thereby involuntarily reproducing coloniality.

In line with this are critiques against Degrowth. Brand (2015) for example, names points of critique that have been brought forward from project partners of the EJOLT²⁰ project in the Global South, such as Degrowth being too anthropocentric, Eurocentric and individualistic, putting insufficient value on the coloniality of knowledge. D'Alisa and Kallis (2015, 187) state that "there is [only] limited reflection concerning the role of science and the ways problems will be solved in a hypothetical degrowth society". Ziai argued more drastically in 2014 that "cultural differences between the West and the Rest" (2014, 6) are not addressed in Degrowth literature, and a critical stance towards the colonization of knowledge through science is "entirely absent [...]. The arguments put forward for social and ecological change are often based on scientific studies, not at all on [for example] spiritual considerations about the rights of nature" (2014, 6).

Even though spiritual aspects receive growing attention within Degrowth, and nature's value is regarded as intrinsic, these critiques still must be taken seriously—especially in relation to the

²⁰ 'Environmental Justice Organizations, Liabilities and Trade' is a global research project bringing science and society together to catalogue and analyse ecological distribution conflicts. For further information see their website <http://www.ejolt.org/>.

global background of the coloniality of knowledge. That makes it decisive and necessary to regard an alliance as mutually benefitting if a pluriverse is pursued. Before I outline how this mutually benefitting, dialectical connection between Degrowth and Ubuntu can be approached, the findings of the two previous chapters are summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Ubuntu and Degrowth at one Glance

	Ubuntu	Degrowth
Emergence	Ubuntu emerged over centuries as a way of life, as an oral tradition transferred from generation to generation through fables, stories or myths.	Degrowth emerged as a reactive philosophy to the existing ills, based in theory and inspired by practices.
	<i>The philosophies emerged very differently, however, they are both philosophies that are constantly evolving and adapting.</i>	
Ontology	Ontologically, Ubuntu regards humans as interconnected with other humans, their environment and non-human beings as well as metaphysically with for example ancestors.	Within Degrowth, humans are regarded as individuals, who have agency towards each other, promoting a common and solidary way of living which is beneficial for humans.
	<i>Whereas Ubuntu ontologically regards the world as being interconnected, within Degrowth entities in the world are connected to each other through agencies they have on each other.</i>	
Epistemology	Based in the interconnectedness, in Ubuntu the world is understood through experiencing and feeling it with all its entities and communicating verbally about it.	Degrowth uses scientific and academic methods to make sense of the world and transfers this knowledge in written and oral ways.
	<i>Ubuntu and Degrowth represent different epistemologies, which transfer knowledge on different ways through different means.</i>	
Values	Ubuntu promotes the interconnectedness of people through enhancing other people's lives. The communal well-being is equally, if not more important than the individual's.	Degrowth promotes solidarity and conviviality among people and a closer relation to the environment. It is based on the morality and feeling of justice towards every human being.
	<i>The value set is the common ground of Ubuntu and Degrowth. Both are promoting a communal way of living that puts value on the well-being of others.</i>	
Practices	Ubuntu practices are often unconscious, they are not intentional towards a bigger goal, and are often mundane and every day practices.	Degrowth practices are often intentional and directed towards a goal. They can be individual but are often collectively organized.
	<i>The practices are differently grounded but end up in similar ways if it comes to smaller-scale activities, whereas there are less big collective projects in Ubuntu than in Degrowth.</i>	

7. A step beyond

To illustrate this connection between Degrowth and Ubuntu, I apply two concepts, namely the situatedness of knowledge and decolonial thinking. Even though these ideas are used here in the context of Ubuntu and Degrowth, they bear relevance beyond solely these two philosophies: for the connection of other different knowledges²¹ within an imagined pluriverse.

7.1 Situating Knowledge

In 1988, Donna Haraway argued for a new philosophy in science, for a new approach towards knowledge. She stated that “we do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power differentiated – communities” (1988, 580). Furthermore, “we are [...] bound to seek perspective from those points of view [...] that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (Haraway 1988, 585).

These requests, 30 years old, are still very valid, by now even overdue, and provide good starting points for a connection. After Metz had claimed that any interpretation of Ubuntu would be supportive for a Degrowth program and thereby confirming their similarities,²² when asked the question on how to connect Ubuntu and Degrowth, he (20.02.2018) gave an answer that could be read according to Haraway’s demands, supportive of a pluriverse;

You might get two different things from Ubuntu in this respect. You might get a philosophy that reinforces Degrowth, and the second thing you might get is a kind of rhetorical device or certain conceptual frameworks, which enables or alleviates a conversation about this project to South Africans.

With his point of Ubuntu being a philosophy that reinforces Degrowth, he confirms the *ability* of an Ubuntu philosophy to be part of a common transition project towards a world, which (not only) Haraway (1988, 585) imagines—one “less organized by axes of domination”. With his second point he emphasized the *validity* of Ubuntu to be part of this transition project (20.02.2018). Regarding knowledges and ways of living that are not the mainstream as equally valid and of importance is crucial within an imagined pluriverse, and it is also imperative for the project of decolonizing knowledges.

His second point is also directly connected to the idea of situated knowledges. With Ubuntu situated in South Africa and Degrowth in Europe, Ubuntu can provide ‘a rhetorical device or a certain conceptual framework’ for Degrowth ideas in South Africa. This would make it possible to “partially translate knowledges among two power differentiated communities”, as Haraway (1988, 580) put it; to contextualize and embody, or put differently, to *re-situate* knowledges and

²¹ Such as the above-mentioned philosophies *Buen Vivir* or *Ecological Swaraj* for example.

²² See the according quotation on page 20.

ideas within a different geographical space and ontology. Praeg independently had the same idea, when he (28.02.2018) explained that it is important to consider;

in what context we want to translate a theory into a practice. Now that is where it becomes important to allow that notion to speak through the local traditions. Not because they show us something terribly unique, not because they can offer us something that nobody in South America, China or Europe has ever thought of. No tradition is that unique. So, if you want to set up a Degrowth initiative in South America, it has to speak the language of *Buen Vivir*. That's what people know, that's what they relate to, it is a question of habitus. It is not the question of a fundamental unique tradition.

When using the term language, he does not simply refer to for example isiZulu, isiXhosa, English or Afrikaans, in order to articulate Degrowth in South Africa. Rather, he speaks of the habitus, the practices and the ontology of a place. So, instead of focusing on the uniqueness of either Degrowth or Ubuntu, one should focus on their commonalities, which make it possible to let them speak through each other.

This could be illustrated through the earlier given example of environmental sustainability. If at one point a project initiated by Degrowth activists or thinkers, for example an environmental justice project against coal mining in Mpumalanga in South Africa, a connection with Ubuntu is a necessary and useful tool. This would give the project the possibility to frame their agenda not only in a rational and academic way, but also in a way that goes beyond that. For example, coal mining is damaging the metaphysical connection of people to their land, and thereby goes against Ubuntu. If the topic is framed in this way, the project could be appealing to a higher number of people. This shall certainly not imply that a rational argumentation against coal mining cannot fall on fertile ground in South Africa. It much rather should be read as a common problem, which is framed and tackled in different but equally valid ways of conveying the message.

Excursion: Malmö and the Degrowth conference

A topic, which is not directly related to connecting Ubuntu to Degrowth but can provide a different perspective on needs and potentials for Degrowth and a more decolonized agenda, came up during the interview with Ekaterina Chertkovskaya: We came to talk about the Degrowth conference²³ in Malmö, for which we both are part of the planning committee, she however being one of the lead coordinators. In Malmö, there are many people with a Middle-Eastern background, therefore our conference intends to put value on a Middle-Eastern context as well. This is one of the articulated aims and we have put effort in making the conference appealing for contributions on related topics. These contributions are thereby not solely academic but can also be in an artistic or activist format.

However, “despite us striving for mixedness, the conference might end up being not as mixed as, for example, Folkets Park [(a park in central Malmö)] itself on a daily basis. And

²³ More information on <https://malmo.degrowth.org/>.

that is something to think about. Certain things we will still try and do – for example reach out to people from particular groups or translate information from the website to Arabic etc... But beyond this, finding the languages (and not only actions) that would speak to different groups and their struggles is important, and here bringing the pluriverse into degrowth can indeed help” (Chertkovskaya 10.04.2018).

The above example leads to the assumption that the approach of re-situating knowledges is not only relevant within different geographical contexts but also within geographical contexts in which a specific knowledge is assumed to be salient. A statement from Chertkovskaya (10.04.2018) that illustrates this relevance more clearly, was that “not only people move around, but with them also their knowledge”. Accordingly, this example demonstrates that it is important to convey a message in a way that is appealing to people’s contexts and their way of perceiving the world. And for this, a universally thought Degrowth agenda is insufficient. Thus, once more, in an inter-connected pluriverse it is crucial to not only be aware of these different ways of living but also to try to understand them and the commonalities between them. Anzaldúa (1990) writes in this context;

Questioning the values of the dominant culture which imposes fundamental difference on those of the ‘wrong’ side of the good/bad dichotomy is the first step. Responding to the *Other* not as irrevocably different is the second step. By highlighting similarities, downplaying differences, that is by *rapprochement* between self and *Other* it is possible to build a syncretic relationship (cited after Maldonado-Torres 2016, 24, emphases in original).

7.2 Decolonize thinking

Such an attempt to open Degrowth up to different ways of knowing, going beyond only acknowledging them, can also benefit to decolonize ways of knowing present in Degrowth. As stated above, Degrowth has been criticized for being too Eurocentric and not sufficiently taking the coloniality of knowledge into account.

As an example of decolonial work, Maldonado-Torres uses Fanon’s work²⁴: He describes it as being explicitly decolonial, because Fanon claimed the “need for the recognition of difference as well as the need for decolonization as an absolute requirement for the proper recognition of human difference and the achievement of a post-colonial and post-European form of humanism” (2010, 36). When considering the geo-politics of knowledge, then decolonization must aim at creating “a new symbolic and material order that takes the full spectrum of human history, its achievements and its failures, into view” (2010, 36).

Makoba (20.03.2018) argued that, despite what the colonizers did to South Africans and how they harmed their ways of living, Ubuntu is still very present and still promotes values such as forgiveness. This makes Ubuntu very valuable and confirms its validity as a functioning way of

²⁴ He is referring to Fanon 1965, 1988.

living and knowing. A stronger engagement with and a promotion of Ubuntu, through for example Degrowth scholars, would strengthen the case for Ubuntu being more recognized among philosophies. It is furthermore another way to question universality claims of Western knowledge, which for example still promotes the idea that philosophy's only roots lie in Greece alone (Maldonado-Torres 2010), and which takes center stage in Degrowth. However, recognition alone is insufficient. Decolonization needs to challenge "the terms in which humanity is defined and recognition takes place" (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 22). Attempts to decolonize need to be affirmative of love and understanding, and furthermore promote open and embodied human interrelationality (Maldonado-Torres 2016).

Briefly mentioned earlier, but relevant in the context of decolonization, was the critique of Ubuntu as being patriarchal. Keevy (2011) argues that Ubuntu entails a hierarchy based on the individual's status, in which the women are depicted inferior to men. During my fieldwork, this hierarchy through Ubuntu was only reaffirmed once during an informal interview, but gender roles in households were generally still present. Makoba (2016) however argues, that patriarchy is not inherent in Ubuntu values, and furthermore is not revealed in practices. Even if this cannot be conclusively attributed to or distanced from Ubuntu, any potential patriarchal tendencies would be challenged within a decolonizing connection to Degrowth. Gender inequality is of high importance in the project of decolonization. An engagement with Degrowth, which puts value on for example feminist ethics of care, would lead to conversations that necessarily bring gender inequalities to the fore if they were present within Ubuntu.²⁵ This could therefore inspire or deepen feminist thinking within a constantly evolving Ubuntu philosophy.

Once I had described Degrowth to Molefe during the interview, he (01.03.2018) asked me how the human being is seen within Degrowth, "what is the human meant to be?". He argued that this could be a challenging question for connecting the two, because this approach could potentially disrupt Degrowth. Within Ubuntu the human being is primarily a social being, as mentioned above, interdependently and spiritually connected with others and its environment. This is contrary to the human being which is meant to be primarily a political or economic being. Metz (20.02.2018) argued similarly that the social aspect is what makes us human, and this must be reflected in a society: "What is distinctively human about us is the ability to care for others, and to be cared for. And to the extent that a society's norms are not designed to enforce that, they are liable to be questioned".

As Degrowth being so broad, it cannot be conclusively stated, whether humans are regarded first and foremost social. As Escobar (2016, 16) puts it, "to think new thoughts [...] requires to move

²⁵ Even though Degrowth is not inherently feminist neither: for example, feminist thinking was none of the sources for Degrowth (see section 5.1.2).

out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle". Therefore, this way of thinking of the human as being primarily social, which renders Ubuntu a relational ontology, should be of importance in a Degrowth philosophy and should inspire and challenge its thinking. The interrelationality needs to become a bigger factor on a Degrowth agenda. Yet, this is certainly only a part of the process of decolonization, according to Maldonado-Torres (2016) it involves further aspects such as for example decolonized aesthetics such as art or decolonizing activism. And, crucially, as stated above, it is a collective project, which is not one of the past but still in the making.

8. Conclusion

Despite being located in different geographical spaces, different ways of seeing and understanding the world, having emerged in oppositional manners—one as a reactive idea towards global ills, one long before most of these ills existed—, my research suggests that an alliance between Degrowth and Ubuntu is certainly justifiable. They share core values and resulting from that some of their practices are shared. They similarly promote a communal way of living and placing a higher value on enhancing and respecting other people's well-being. They are furthermore opposing the same values of individuality, materialism and egocentrism. Whereas Degrowth is actively trying to overcome these values, Ubuntu is trying to withstand their rising influence in the South African society.

The arena of environmental sustainability shows more concretely that the two philosophies can be strategically connected towards a common goal, even though the approaches towards this goal are different. Independently of it being framed within a deep ecology movement or as strategic essentialism: essentializing different peoples or cultures intent on protecting the environment could help build a stronger force towards a change in the problematic way humans are interacting with nature.

Recognizing these similarities is however only the first step. In order to genuinely decolonize ways of thinking and acting, there needs to be an engagement with other ontologies and epistemologies. This is critical for Degrowth and must be pursued actively. Otherwise, unintentionally, hierarchies could be perpetuated or even reproduced instead of being taken down. Therefore, approaching the unknown with the awareness of its situatedness, and embrace it even though it seems foreign, is crucial in creating a steady pluriverse. This imagined pluriverse will still take place in a globalized and entangled world, and therefore would face challenges that make a connection of knowledges necessary. It cannot be up to the people of one dominant individual cosmivision to pursue well-being for all people. Different ways of living and knowing need to be connected

towards certain common goals, and according strategies must be adapted and contextualized to the situatedness of people.

A mutually beneficial connection between Degrowth and Ubuntu is certainly one part of this, but it is also only one out of many. Both represent a contextual alternative for a post-developmental era. Their common ground makes them logical alliances in a global transition project. As they are however evolving philosophies, through approaching the pluriverse they can inspire each other further in a positive way. Ubuntu can enrich Degrowth with a more holistic and spiritual vision, and thereby challenge dominant perceptions of the world, which are also present in Degrowth. Degrowth would be supporting Ubuntu in creating space for Ubuntu values to flourish and could furthermore be helpful in bridging the traditional values to more contemporary settings such as urban areas.

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Appendix: List of Interviews (Alphabetical Order)

- Chertkovskaya, Ekaterina; interviewed by Thies Hoeft, Malmö, Sweden, 10.04.2018
- Makoba, Ntokozo; interviewed by Thies Hoeft, Durban, South Africa, 20.03.2018
- Metz, Thaddeus; interviewed by Thies Hoeft, Johannesburg, South Africa, 20.02.2018
- Molefe, Motsamai; interviewed by Thies Hoeft, Johannesburg, South Africa, 01.03.2018
- Praeg, Leonhard; interviewed by Thies Hoeft, Johannesburg, South Africa, 28.02.2018