Ubuntu and the gender question: Towards a gender-inclusive theory

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Thesis accepted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy* at the North-West University

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Graduation:June 2025

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and deepest gratitude to my promotor, Prof. Chantelle Gray. Thank you for your guidance, mentorship, support, motivation and patience. Thank you for the long hours and commitment that you put into ensuring that I completed this thesis. I could not have done this without you. May God bless you, always.

I am thankful to Prof. Anné Verhoef, the Director of the School of Philosophy. Thank you for the teaching relief, and your encouragement and support over the years of my academic journey.

To my husband, thank you for your understanding, love, motivation and all the nights you stayed up waiting for me to finish my study. I am truly grateful.

And finally, to my family, I am truly grateful for your support, love and encouragement over the years. To my parents, this is for all the times you pushed, motivated and encouraged me. Thank you for believing in me. This thesis is dedicated to you!

Abstract

In this thesis, I set out to investigate the 'gender question' in its relations to ubuntu which has been said to offer a uniquely African moral framework. Here, the 'gender question' has a double function: 1) to broaden the notion of the 'woman question', aimed primarily at equality between men and women, to include all genders; and 2) to indicate the questions raised about gender as they relate to ubuntu.

My reason for undertaking this project is that even though ubuntu has been met with much positivity, it has also been criticised for being vague, pre-scientific, elitist and deeply implicated in practices of patriarchy and heteronormativity – norms which impose a *logic* according to which heterosexuality is posited implicitly and explicitly as *better*, just as the primacy of manhood is. This raises an important question: If ubuntu is not only a moral framework but also a *normative* moral framework, what are its gendered assumptions and correlative gendered affordances? In other words, are its gendered assumptions *just* or are they in need of problematisation?

To address this question, I look at studies on *affordance* and the perception of affordance, or the set of possibilities for action available to agents in their environments, as well as *governmentality*, to show how gendered race and racialised gender became *sites of knowledge* that themselves functioned as organising principles and logics whose power was to produce, demarcate and control bodies in specific ways. Important for the purposes of this study is my argument that change cannot occur epistemologically or ethically without ontology being addressed.

To do so, I employ a counter-mapping methodology to create a cartography of opacity, fugitivity, Africanfuturism, Afro-feminism, motherism and commoning to disrupt hegemonic archives of feminism and ubuntu. Through this, I yoke ontology to ecology to posit the importance of an onto-ecological view in which human and human, as well as human and nature, are brought together in the wholeness of ubuntu. Such understandings of wholeness are, as I show, an important part of much indigenous knowledges of the Global South generally and Africa specifically. In short, my argument is that for a gender-inclusive ubuntu to emerge, its ontological assumptions and underpinning must be scrutinised and changed – only then can a truly just ethics emerge.

Keywords: African feminism, Africanfuturism, Afro-feminism, decolonisation, feminism, fugitivity, gender, governmentality, onto-ecology, opacity, the logic of enclosure, ubuntu

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 General introductory remarks on gender and ubuntu

1.1.1 Affordance

The United Nation's (UN) seventeen identified Sustainable Development Goals are widely recognised as the blueprint for achieving a future that is inclusive of all, rather than just some. To that end, gender equality has been identified as the fifth goal and is not only aimed at achieving financial equity – which includes "the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public office" (United Nations, n.d.) – but also targets other consequences of gender imbalances such as sexual violence and exploitation. Philosophically, this can be understood in terms of *affordances*. While this is not the only way, it is the lens I will use throughout this thesis, especially because almost half of married women still do not have real decision-making power, as the UN graphic on gender shows (Gender Equality, n.d.). Manuel Heras-Escribano defines affordances as "the possibilities for action that are available to agents in their environments" (2019:3), though the term was first developed by J. J. Gibson "to reject the sensualistic and passive" understandings of perception (3). According to Heras-Escribano, affordance, thus, not only refers to the fact that agents *perceive* their environment phenomenologically, but also that they perceive what can *be done* with the environment. Thus, agents can be said to "perceive the graspability of a cup, the climbability of a step, or the kickability of a ball" (3). In other words, affordances are what allow the actions of agents to be perceived as *meaningful.* Although affordances can constrain what is possible for an agent, such affordances are themselves constrained by the environments they emerge from. Important in this regard is what Heras-Escribano calls a "situated approach" to affordances, which he argues for by giving the example of the difference in socialisation between boys and girls, with the latter typically being "taught to hamper their movement" or gestures, especially when they "engage in activities with their mates, they are asked not to get dirty, not to tear their clothes, or not to get hurt, acquiring a fragility and timidity that develops with age (184; see also Young, 1980:153).

In her seminal article, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality", Marrion Young provides evidence for these claims, referencing studies in which both young boys and girls "categorically assert that girls are more

likely to get hurt than boys are, and that girls ought to remain close to home" (1980:43). These perceptions of what boys and girls are capable of can therefore be said to translate into *gendered affordances*.

However, a situated approach to affordances allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the feminine body is spatially constructed – historically, culturally, religiously, and so on – which enables a "reversability assumption" according to which spatial feminine existence could be understood and experienced differently (Heras-Escribano, 2019:184). A different way of saying this is that affordance is not simply inherent to a situation. Rather, it is constrained by phenomena such as sexism and patriarchy in this case, which affects the way men and women perceive their possible action in a given environment.

"From an ecological perspective," as Heras-Escribano says, "we can say that boys critically restrict the capacity of girls for taking the affordances that are available for them by restricting their space" (2019:186). Here, 'ecology' is a broad term to refer to natural, social and cultural environments. The point is that an ecological approach sees neither the organism/agent nor the environment as a unit of analysis on its own but rather the "organism–environment system" according to which organisms are "active explorers of their surroundings and their actions, along with the energies of the environment", which then "give rise to ecological information" (197). This is important for this study because it allows for an understanding of both social norms and environmental conditions as aspects "related to the capacities agents possess", as well as the perceived affordances of the environment (197). Essentially, "perception and action are continuous and cyclic: You have to act in order to perceive possibilities for action, which produces an action–perception loop that guides the exploration of the agent" (198).

Affordance can therefore be seen as one aspect of the 'gender question' which I will look at in this thesis. For the purposes of my study, the term 'gender question' is used as a play on the 'woman question', which broadly refers to questions centred on the societal status and afforded capacities of women from the 1400 to the 1700s, including the "struggle for the higher education of women and the demand for womanhood suffrage" (Spongberg, 2002:130). Because the concept of 'gender' is more inclusive than 'woman', I prefer the term 'gender question'. Additionally, it has a second implication, namely the question of gender and, for this research project, the question of gender as it relates to ubuntu.

With reference to scholars from the University of Cambridge, Joe Pinkstone contends that even work that has been labelled 'domestic' becomes gendered because men and women are socialised to "perceive what they see in different ways" (2022:n.p.). That is, for "many domestic tasks, women are more likely to perceive the corresponding domestic task

affordance" (Pinkstone, 2022:n.p.). Prof. Paulina Sliwa, who worked at the University of Vienna at the time Pinkstone wrote this article, says this can even be backed by science. "Neuroscience has shown that perceiving an affordance can trigger neural processes preparing you for physical action", which can "range from a slight urge" to an "overwhelming compulsion, but it often takes mental effort not to act on an affordance" (quoted in Pinkstone, 2022:n.p.). She goes on to say that this "puts women in a Catch-22 situation: either inequality of labour or inequality of cognitive load" (Sliwa quoted in Pinkstone, 2022:n.p.). This also implies that there is a relationship "between affective atmospheres and affordances" (Jorba & Pablo López-Silva, 2024:1582). For example, every time a woman feels compelled to complete a domestic task, this may be accompanied by resentment, a feeling of hopelessness, anger and so on. But, depending on how the woman has been socialised, it may, on the other hand, be perceived as something beneficial to her spiritual growth. Such gendered affordances, as Elisabetta Stringhi argues, affect not only individuals, but also collectives in that they present *normative* models for the way individual agency should be perceived and enacted (2022:5). The normative models then structure the affordances available to different agents as perceived from their ecologies which themselves inform "larger social structures of gender inequality" (6). For example, the idea that certain work is domestic already implies a gendered variation which influences the way different agents take up affordances based on their gender. This may be further exacerbated or alleviated by "precise cultural repertoires and macro relations between" individuals and "their social structures of gender" (6). More pernicious, though, is when these perceived gendered affordances translate into forms of violence, bias and exploitation justified – and sometimes covered up by – systems of patriarchy, misogyny and so on.

Tom McClelland and Paulina Sliwa confirm these findings in their own work on gendered affordances, stating that thinking about how we *do* gender – rather than simply trying to state what it *is* – helps to "explain the unequal labour distribution within relationships" by showing how *perceived* gender roles and their affordances shape the "gender strategies" of individuals by "shaping their deeply-held beliefs, desires, and feelings" (2023:504). Based on these beliefs, desires and the like, agents then enact their gendered roles, such as domestic labour – labour which became viewed as 'free' because of certain historical developments such as capitalism and the enclosure of the commons, which were accompanied by witch hunts in Europe, as I discuss in Chapter 3. They go on to argue that "doing gender" is "not an individualistic explanation" because "what counts as 'doing gender' happens in the context of interpersonal interactions and is shaped and sustained by institutional structures, including workplace arrangements, economic conditions, legal frameworks, and societal expectations"

(2022:n.p.). Of these, heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are just some related to gender, as I show in Chapter 2.

When we *do* gender according to these norms and expectations, we also reproduce and legitimate gendered arrangements. In turn, this affects our sensitivity to the action possibilities in our ecologies. One consequence of this is that "two agents who filter affordances in different ways could have very different perceptual experiences of the same environment" (McClelland & Sliwa, 2023:508). Even if two agents were sensitive to the same affordances, "they might not be sensitive to them in the same *way*" because one of them may "perceive the cup as *to be drunk from*, experiencing a strong solicitation to act," while the other "might perceive the cup as affording drinking from but experience little or no solicitation to act on that affordance" (508). This also applies to gendered affordances, as is the case with domestic work. These perceptions of gendered affordance can also change, as can be seen from the ways in which gender was perceived in some societies before colonialism, as well as during and after, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.1.2 Ubuntu and gender

How do gendered affordances relate to ubuntu, a term which first entered South African English literary and political discourse during the Black Consciousness era of the 1970s and the 1980s (Driver, 2005:219), even though it existed as a set of African practices related to morality before that time? Although not explicitly part of ubuntu in its original conception, ubuntu understands personhood as the normative idea that a "person is a person through other people" (Metz, 2011:537). So, whether man or woman, the implication is that an individual develops moral personhood only in relation to other people. This implies further that the role of the community is pivotal for the development of an individual and can, therefore, be understood as providing communal affordances for the individual, as reflected in the Nguni phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*" – roughly translated as "I am what I am because of who we are" (Maluleke, 2012:3).

The idea of interdependence is thus important, as I have shown, because it can manifest as positively or negatively perceived affordances. For example, in traditional societies, it is understood that an individual should not desire to fulfil his or her own dreams but must understand these in relation to the 'whole' of which she or he is just a part. As Moeketsi Letseka says, "Ubuntu holds that the community is essential to intersubjectivity and that a person is incomplete unless he/she maintains an active connection with the society or culture of which he/she is a part of" (Letseka, 2013:352; see also Keevy 2009:33 and Chisale, 2018:3). Additionally, values such as care, respect, compassion and consensus are often

represented in this communal relation which is understood in terms of the "wholeness of human life" (Chisale, 2018:4; see also Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004:548). There is thus a "communal or group rationality" – what might be called a 'collective morality' – at stake (Mangena, 2012:1), which does not mean that no individual aspects are recognised, but rather that the individual is understood *in relation* to the larger community.

Inasmuch as ubuntu has been met with positivity and has been praised in African societies – it has even been tied to issues of liberation, development and identity (see, for example, Dolamo, 2013:1) – it has also been criticised for being vague, pre-scientific and irrelevant for modern society (Viviers & Mzondi, 2014:2). Moreover, some view ubuntu as an elitist creation, "similar to other utopian ideas like African socialism, African communitarianism and consciencism" (7). Others still have argued that its patriarchal assumptions have specific gendered affordances. For example, Molly Manyonganise argues that ubuntu, as an academic study, is "dominated by men" who more often than not disregard "the implications of ubuntu on gender" (2015:2). Fainos Mangena too argues that ubuntu is deeply implicated in practices of patriarchy and is in need of an African feminist ethic that can provide women with strategies "to fight patriarchy inside out" (2009:28). Ilze Keevy argues, likewise, that the problem with ubuntu is that it often sustains deeply patriarchal hierarchies "which assign rights on the basis of communal membership, family, status or membership" (2009:36) so that a person's status is determined by "gender, age, and seniority in birth" (Keevy, 2009:39; see also Bhana, 2016:84). As a result, African women and gender-nonconforming people often find themselves in a position where they must comply with patriarchal rules and assumptions – or *affordances* – "without thought or critique" (Keevy, 2009:41). This has resulted, for instance, in girls frequently underperforming in comparison to their male counterparts in the classroom because they are expected to take on caregiving roles (Bhana, 2016:84).

In addition, such issues often extend beyond the educational development of these young women and girls to affect their social life and development too. Even the health of these young girls is compromised as they are often faced with other challenges, such as arranged marriages to older men by elders in their communities. As Wolf, McCoy and Godfrey argue, "sociocultural and economic factors can impede access to basic education for girls, as traditional perceptions on the expected roles of girls to be at home and do household chores persist" (2012:181). Mikateko Joyce Maluleke notes that other harmful customary practices include virginity testing; *ukutwala*, a form of abduction that entails the kidnapping of a girl or young woman by a man, his friends or his family members with the intention of compelling the female's family to endorse marriage negotiations; and *ukungena*, which is when a widowed woman is expected to choose a husband without knowing who she is choosing. Such a woman

is often expected to marry a relative of her deceased husband and does so out of fear (2012:3, 11).

Deevia Bhana also provides an example of gender inequality as reflected in rural communities in South Africa. According to Bhana, KwaZulu-Natal, a province of South Africa, has high rates of poverty and HIV/AIDS infection (2016:87), which affects women in specific ways. Because of the strongly gendered environment in which women are considered subordinates of men, they are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. Moreover, because many women are financially dependent on men, "women's economic mobility is hindered" and "they have little to say when it comes to decision making" (Bhana, 2016:87). It would seem, then, that ubuntu is a kind of double-edged sword when it comes to gender, empowering "women on the one hand by advocating for notions of equality and human dignity" yet oppressing them on the other "by perpetuating the masculine authority and patriarchal values" (Chisale, 2018:1).

This presents us with a dilemma because ubuntu is often positioned as a uniquely African philosophy and moral framework. As a general moral framework, it deals with questions relating to what is considered right action and wrong action, as well as the reasons for doing so. As I argue extensively in Chapter 2 of this thesis, many philosophers have contended that ubuntu presents not only a moral framework, but a *normative* moral framework. According to Dietmar von der Pfordten, an adequate normative ethics must have at least the following five commitments:

> (1) normative individualism, i.e., the view that in the last instance moral norms and values can only be justified by reference to the individuals concerned, as its basis; (2) consideration of the individuals' concerns and interests – aims, desires, needs, strivings – insofar as they have a justificatory function; (3) a pluralism of references of these concerns and hence of moral norms and values to all possible elements of actions; (4) the necessity of a principle of aggregation and weighing with regard to these concerns; (5) finally, as a central principle of aggregation and weighing, the principle of relative reference to self and others, operating as a generalizing meta-principle that guides the application of concrete principles and decisions (von der Pfordten, 2012:449-450).

In his understanding of a normative moral framework, the third principle relates most directly to affordance ("possible elements of actions"). Additionally, he sketches here a fundamental "asymmetry between the moral consideration of individuals" and that of collectives (457) and argues for a justification of the former as taking precedence. This, as I have shown, is in direct contrast to the African emphasis on community. Thus, the isiXhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, "which means a person is a person only through its relationship to other human

beings" (Marx, 2002:52; see also Gade, 2011:319), can be seen to carry with it both *normative* and *prescriptive* connotations in that they "instruct one to become a real person or to realize one's true self, and to do so by relating to other people in certain ways" (Metz, 2019; see also Metz & Gaie, 2010:275).

Owing to the fact that the communal part of ubuntu is associated with care, and care is highly valued in feminism, it seems almost 'natural' that gender and ubuntu could be used in conjunction to produce a normative ethics that is gender inclusive. However, as I go on to discuss at length in the second chapter, it does not in fact address women's rights, or attitudes towards, for example, homosexuals and transgender people. This raises an important question – and the one guiding the reason for this thesis – namely: If ubuntu is not only a moral framework but also a *normative* moral framework, what are its gendered assumptions and correlative gendered affordances? In other words, are its gendered assumptions *just* – by which I mean can they be recognised as furthering the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN in terms of gender equality and, thereby, addressing the unjust consequences of gender inequality, such as sexual violence and exploitation – or is it in need of problematisation? Moreover, how can this be understood in terms of gendered affordances, as discussed above? This subset of questions thus forms the first research question I address in this thesis. In addition, these questions raise another set of questions, namely that of a normative agenda of feminism which, as Kimberley Hutchings reminds us, has for a long time been "a matter of political contestation amongst feminists" (2000:11). The question thus concerns the legitimacy of something like a normative feminism because, as the Gender Studies scholar and philosopher Judith Butler has argued, when feminist theories create their own *gender norms*, this restricts "the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice", thus setting up "exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (2016:viii). To put it plainly, gender norms *assume* that genders are stable categories rather than social constructs. This is not to say that the physical body is *only* socially constructed; rather, it is to ask how social constructs work – what they *do* in terms of gender – because their *doing* of gender, such as through gendered categories, means they function as the background condition for gendered affordance. Rather than working towards including gender in frameworks of ubuntu in this way, I follow Butler to ask instead: "How do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man?" (2016:xi). More to the point, how do historical studies of conceptions of gender in Africa call into question the patriarchal tendencies in ubuntu, as well as homophobic inclinations in many African countries? This leads me to formulate a third set of questions, namely: Can ubuntu, as a normative moral framework, accommodate a *non-normative* gender dimension? And if so,

what would a more explicitly gender-inclusive conception of ubuntu look like theoretically and allow for practically?

1.2 A broad overview of the thesis chapters

1.2.1 Overview of Chapter 2: Ubuntu and gender: Foundations, challenges, ideals

To answer the three sets of questions raised in the previous section, I begin the second chapter by contextualising ubuntu in terms of its theoretical underpinnings as well as its related practices in African contexts. As will be seen, ubuntu is not easily defined and is therefore best understood in terms of a number of related and overlapping ideas, the first of which addresses the issue of ontology which, in African contexts, should be understood as consisting of a primal cosmological state, the existence of particular entities, the dead (or ancestors) and nature. In other words, there is generally an understanding that ubuntu describes two aspects of being: being as a 'one-ness' and being as "an indivisible wholeness" (Coetzee & Roux, 2003:272).

As I will argue in Chapter 2, ontology is in fact foundational for rethinking gender in its relations to ubuntu. This, as Sylvia Tamale argues powerfully in her recent book, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism* (2020), is also a decolonial strategy. In her words, "as part of the decolonial feminist project, Africa must begin to examine itself and theorize its gender relations through fresh prisms and ontological frameworks; to employ the tool of ubuntu as a mechanism for vigorously engaging with life questions" (227). Yet, as I will argue throughout this chapter, although Tamale points towards this in her work, she herself takes a more legalistic route towards justice. My aim, however, will be to argue that no moral framework can be truly just without questioning its normative assumptions at the level of ontology – and not just at the levels of epistemology or ethics. My justification for this argument lies in the links between ubuntu ontology and its conceptions of humanness and personhood, with the former "aimed at countering a behaviour that was considered as dehumanizing" (Murove, 2014:37) and the latter dictating the relations between the community and the individual.

Both humanness and personhood thus set out a specific kind of normative behaviour in that they describe what behaviour 'should' or 'ought to' be. As I will argue, while the ideal of ubuntu humanness seems to include all, there remains, as Lindokuhle Gama argues, a gap "between the idealized Afro-personhood" described in much of the literature on ubuntu and "socially recognized personhood among African persons", especially given that "heteropatriarchy continues to be an oppressive aspect of" many African societies (2023:9). What I aim to show is that heteropatriarchy is only one of the ways in which gender is regulated and enforced, and that it works together with other governing strategies such as hegemonic masculinity, aimed

at regulating not only the binary conception of gender as consisting of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, but also regulating what can be considered a normative expression of manhood. What I show from this argument is that these socially accepted practices affect the perceived affordances of both men and women, as well as every other expression of gender.

This argument is further developed in terms of the community, as well as morality. These aspects, like humanness and personhood, cannot be viewed in isolation and must be understood as part of a constellation of concepts that make up ubuntu. As has been mentioned, some emphasis is placed on “the supreme value of society, [and] the primary importance of social or communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual” (Molefe, 2016:24). Here I ask another question related to the justness of ubuntu, namely: If the community is the overriding normative guide for individual action and individuation, but remains patriarchal or biased against gender nonconforming persons, can ubuntu truly be said to be a just moral framework? This, again, relates to gendered assumptions and affordances, which leads me to conclude that gender must be addressed at the level of ontology – even within ubuntu – if a truly just moral framework is to emerge. In addition, I ask whether indigenous knowledge structures of gender before the colonial era can pave the way towards a more nuanced view of personhood. This, then, is the subject of the third chapter.

In summary, the main objectives of this chapter are: 1) to contextualise the term ubuntu by providing a comprehensive overview of the definitions thereof; and 2) to begin to think about the way the gender question is integrated into the concept and practices of ubuntu, with reference to recent literature on the subject.

1.2.2 Overview of Chapter 3: Gender in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa

The broad aim of this chapter is to begin to recentre existing knowledge about gender by looking at how it was understood and practised in precolonial Africa. While I cannot cover every aspect, but I will include enough coverage to argue that it was more diverse and even fluid. Furthermore, by focusing on Africa as the source of knowledge on gender, I aim to show that the body has been understood variously throughout history; that is, I show that ontologies are often practised differently from the way they are theorised, even though these can sometimes align. As I will argue in more detail, this is also true for ubuntu which has, on the one hand, the idea of an egalitarian community – which seemingly means that there is equality for all – and on the other its material practices, which tend to be heteronormative.

As is well documented, the colonial era had devastating and long-lasting effects in most African countries. In their report on the Atlantic slave trade, the Equal Justice Initiative reported that nearly “13 million African people were kidnapped and trafficked across the Atlantic to the Americas, including the British, French, and Spanish colonies that would later comprise the United States” (Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.). This, which went hand-in-hand with the colonisation of the African continent, destabilised African countries, societies and families. It was also during this time that “a caste system based on race and color emerged in tandem with legal and political systems to codify white supremacy and enshrine enslavement as a permanent and hereditary status” (Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.:25). The widespread dehumanisation of African people has had lasting and intergenerational consequences, and is at least one reason, along with the apartheid system in South Africa, why ubuntu addresses the issue of dehumanisation.

Although not on the scale of the Atlantic slave trade, the witch hunts that took place in many parts of Europe show how gender was used as part of a set of complex, diverse and “regulatory procedures” to create and shape “uneven geography[ies] of dispossession” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:3) by intervening especially in “spheres of production and social reproduction” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:6) – which Silvia Federici develops extensively in her theorisation of free gendered labour, as I show in Chapter 4. It may seem strange at first to include European history in a thesis on ubuntu, but my reason for doing so is to show that the problem of the gendered body – and of course the gendered body in its multiple intersections with race, ability and so on – is complex and diverse and should thus be understood in terms of *multiple ontologies*. This is true even of African ontologies, which are diverse and variously expressed. Of particular importance in this chapter is addressing the roles of women in precolonial Africa, as well as the practice of homosexuality, which was as widely spread in Africa as anywhere else. With reference to numerous studies, I show that women often had prominent roles in their communities before the colonial years which ranged in terms of scope. Thus, some women led armies and governed kingdoms, while others were involved in economic affairs or played important roles in the community, such as telling stories for the oral transmission of intergenerational knowledge.

This changed dramatically during the colonial era when the bodies of men and women became both racialised and sexualised in specific ways, with rigid gender binaries being installed. These new ways of being and seeing greatly disrupted the values and traditions of existing societies and, according to Boris Bertolt (2018), this is also one of the reasons why African patriarchy became reproduced in particular ways. More generally, I theorise this in terms of Michel Foucault’s understanding of power, especially as it relates to gendered race and

racialised gender, as *technologies* (techné) of power. The reason for considering gendered race and racialised gender as technologies is that it would allow for an understanding not only of colonial operations as they were applied to people's bodies in order to subjugate them, but also for understanding how people reoriented these technologies in the applications of them to their "own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" for the making, unmaking and remaking of the self, whether for the purposes of survival, or something more aesthetic (Foucault, 1988:8). This is important especially in the final chapter where I discuss ontological strategies of resistance like fugitivity and opacity.

The issue at stake is thus whether or not we can get 'outside of' Western thought, or patriarchal thought, or any other hegemonic kind of thought or, if not, how we can destabilise these as *primary* for thought. As I show, this speaks directly to the decolonial feminist project outlined by Tamale and the related issue of decolonial affordances, both in terms of gender and of ubuntu, as well as in terms of the gender–ubuntu nexus. However, this requires grappling with *heteronormativity* which, as the term suggests, is a framework for regulating gendered and sexual practices by positing heterosexuality not only as *normative*, but also as *normal*. Jürgen Link and Mirko Hall asks how we are to understand these terms. That is, does *normal* imply "in conformity with norms" or "standardized" (2004:17)? And is there a difference between 'normality' and 'normativity'? To answer these questions, I look at the *norming* effects of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, situating them as technologies and mechanisms of power for silencing, regulating, or subordinating some genders to more dominant and seemingly 'acceptable' or 'legitimate' ones. These norming effects, while epistemological, *become* ontological when they are so normalised that they become invisible – accepted as 'the way things are'. To challenge this, I turn in the next chapter to the history of the witch hunts to show how social categories are created, justified and normalised over time, while having specific spatial significance in terms of *place.*

1.2.3 Overview of Chapter 4: Gendered ecologies, governmentality and the logic of enclosure

As just mentioned, Chapter 4 is concerned with the conditions that triggered the witch hunts in Europe – and also later in Africa. However, before it was a problem of gender, it was a question of place; that is, I understand gender to be the logical outcome of the enclosure of the commons. To explain what I mean, this chapter should be seen as a continuation of the previous one in that I sketch a general overview of how enclosure was enacted in Europe, and later, during the colonial years, in Africa. In order to do this, I refer to Sylvia Federici's seminal work on the witch hunts in Europe because, as I argue, it demonstrates clearly some of the effects of the *logic* of enclosure.

For Federici (2004:69), enclosure is a technical term that denotes the set of strategies employed by English lords and rich farmers to eliminate communal land and expand their holdings in the 16th century. As communal land and crops became fenced off, people were displaced, leaving many with nowhere to go and without a means of income. At the time, this kind of land privatisation and the commercialisation of agriculture were widely said to have been done to 'uplift' people from poverty, though in reality it undermined many local economies and devalued the social position of women, as colonisation did with African women. These conditions eventually gave rise to the witch hunts which had the most devastating consequences for poor and older women. As is well documented, during the witch hunts, accused women were tortured and, if found guilty, executed in public, usually by being burnt at the stake. This basically resulted in *femicide* and was fuelled by *misogyny* or the structural discrimination of women based on assumptions that they are inferior to men and therefore not capable of what men are. The witch hunts were thus not only aimed at individual women, but more broadly at teaching all women what their place in society was, thus creating a society "controlled by powerful men", as Bridget Marshall (2019) concurs. Another important consequence was that it "paved the way for the confinement of women in Europe to unpaid domestic labour" by legitimising and so justifying "their subordination to men in and beyond the family" (Federici, 2018:48).

Related to the 'gender question', as becomes clear here, is the 'land question' because, as recognised by many feminists, those most harmed by the reconfiguration of land is women, as can be seen from the example of the witch hunts. In apartheid South Africa, this kind of enclosure – which served to include some and exclude others – came about with the creation of the ten 'homelands' aimed at confining black citizens to certain areas, a move which in essence opened the way for massed forced removals. More generally, and philosophically, I argue that enclosure – whether land enclosure or the enclosure of bodies via constructions like race and gender – should be understood in terms of a "*logic* of enclosure" (Mbembe, 2017:35). In *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe (2017) argues that race and racialisation have, since the start of the 18th century, become regulatory mechanisms of power that determine *in advance* what is possible for a body – in terms of livelihood, in terms of respect, in terms of the law, and so on. With this in mind I argue that Federici's work, in tandem with Mbembe's, provides a powerful framework for thinking about racialised gender and gendered race, aimed at 'civilising' or taming certain bodies and lands. Thus I tentatively begin to show that there are grounds for arguing that ontology should be understood ecologically, not only because land, gender and race are structurally tied, as shown by the histories of enclosure which include that of colonialism, but also because more "mundane instances of

environed embodiment" (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018:1) have detrimental effects especially on certain gendered bodies.

The link between the 'gender question' and the 'land question' is justified by the many analogies between women and nature, which include notions such as 'mother earth' and 'earth mothers'; as well as 'wild women' – women who run with wolves – as opposed to tame or enslaved women; not to mention "fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands" and "raped earths" (Alaimo, 2000:2). In other words, to justify the enclosure of the commons and the later colonial quests which resulted in the annexation of land, gendered and racial enclosures had to be enacted so that women could be made ontologically equivalent to nature, just as black women and men had to be made equivalent to animals, thus casting all of these bodies "outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency" (Alaimo, 2000:2). As the land and animals had to be tamed and domesticated, so too did gendered and racialised bodies. However, this also provides me with some grounds for strategising *commoning* as a decolonial move aimed at expressing human solidarity and producing communal health – physical, psychical and spiritual.

On the website of The Commons Social Change Library, the verb *commoning* is described as a "short-hand description for participating in collective actions that co-create the ongoing emergence of dynamic commons" (Smith, 2024). Commoning, as I will argue, provides a strategy for linking ubuntu and gender, as well as ontology, with ecology, because it emphasises "the role of relationship-building within commoning", as well as "how the creation and maintenance of commons requires us to build networks of relationships within which we each take care of one another and our environments" (Smith, 2024). Vineetha Venugopal argues that although the verb 'commoning' stems from the old English word 'commoner', "the idea by itself did not originate in the West" as humans, across the globe, "have lived socially in close but diverse relations with nature and have practiced 'commoning' as a way of life" (Venuugopal, 2020). Commoning can also be understood as that which is not *commodified* (De Angelis, 2014). This highlights the fact that commodification and enclosures – as described by Federici – led to "dispossession, widespread inequality, and environmental degradation" (De Angelis, 2014:3). Like enclosures, commoning practices necessarily "involve a renegotiation of the political relationships through which everyday community affairs, production and exchange are organised and governed", although instead of this being forced – as is the case with enclosures – commoning involves more democratic and communal decision-making. My argument will not remain at this level only, however, since I will argue that commoning must include an ontological dimension from which aesthetic practices of

resistance can emerge. Nevertheless, commoning and enclosures should not be confused or used synonymously.

To better understand enclosures – and what they triggered – I refer to the history of enclosures in Europe and the witch hunts that accompanied them. Of particular importance is Federici's work on the role of gender in this context. I argue that gender is intricately linked to land, suggesting that gender be understood in terms of gendered *ecologies.* Drawing on recent feminist work on new materialism and critical posthumanism, I advocate for, following Rosi Braidotti (2017), a new ecological posthuman subjectivity according to which organisms are understood to be embodied and embedded, meaning any given individual can only ever have a "partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality" and "community building" (49). Like ubuntu, critical posthumanism rejects individualism while promoting "an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of" the Enlightenment human, instead focusing on creating an "enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (49). The postcolonial scholar, Simone Bignall, along with Steve Hemming and Daryle Rigney, has argued that this kind of focus on the intersections between capitalism, colonial histories and indigeneity is crucial for rethinking "ecological health and long-term sustainability" (Bignall *et al*., 2016:416). Their work on the indigenous Ngarrindjeri also brings together ontology and ecology through their "statement of authority in a *Yannarumi* (Speaking as Country) Deed", through which they argue that the *Yannarumi* "conveys a Ngarrindjeri philosophy in which being is expressed (or 'spoken') through processes of ecological connectivity" (469); that is, in terms of an "ontology of Being as 'more-than-human'" (470).

Continuing this line of argument, I turn to African feminisms. As outlined earlier in this chapter, feminism, gender studies and queer theory were birthed by movements originating in Western Europe and the United States (US), which meant that feminism was constructed in Global North terms. During the third wave of feminism, this was contested and the postcolonial era of critical theory was born. However, many African scholars argued that although this brought about some changes, gender theories and practices remained insufficient in their coverage of African knowledges and concerns. Scholars like Obioma Nnaemeka thus argued that a reconceptualisation was necessary, a move endorsed by other important African feminist theorists like Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyěwùmí, both of whom have produced seminal works detailing historical accounts of how gender was practised in Africa. For example, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (2005), Amadiume argues convincingly that in Africa gender was conceived differently, as we see from the Nnobi and Igbo societies in which the separation between gender and biological sex meant that daughters could become 'male

daughters' who took the lineage position of a son, just as women could take the role of a husband as a 'female husband' so that widowed women could marry for economic reasons.

After providing a number of other studies as examples, I turn to an important development in African feminism, namely *motherism,* which, I argue in the final chapter, provides an African anchor for linking ontology and ecology, as motherism is generally understood to refer to more than just childbearing. This is because it is also linked to the traditional role played by women in the peaceful management of the environment and in indigenous knowledge.

In the final chapter, I put forward the view that what is needed for a truly gender-inclusive ubuntu is an onto-ecological foundation for the creation of a decolonial-inflected ethics.

1.2.4 Overview of Chapter 5: Towards a gender-inclusive ubuntu

Numerous scholars have argued that the current ecological crises have a strong grounding in the ontologies and epistemologies of coloniality during which nature and culture became separated. Mathew Bukhi Mabele, Wilhelm Andrew Kiwango and Iddi Mwanyoka argue, accordingly, that part of the decolonial project needs to be disrupting this "epistemic empire" (2023:n.p.). Bringing nature-ontologies together with human-ontologies is thus a move towards reestablishing communal wholeness, such as that promoted by ubuntu. It also suggests a continuity rather than a hard break between human identity and other ecologies, and thus problematises any notion of fixed identity – which I will argue is of great importance.

Although I used the term 'ecology' to denote the natural environment, it does not only refer to nature. Rather, it allows us to think about intersecting ecologies, whether they be an economic ecology, a gendered ecology, a racial ecology, or any other. It also helps us to think about ecology in larger spatial and temporal terms so that phenomena like *slow violence* can be accounted for. In his book, *Slow Violence*, Rob Nixon argues that it is imperative to think about not only the violence of wars and acts of terrorism, but also about the kinds of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011:2). This includes violence related to climate change, such as deforestation, which results in an incapacity to *act*, or at least in a restricted capacity to act. In other words, it is related to affordance. Gender, too, can be seen as a form of slow violence in this sense. What becomes clear is that there is a link between ontological representation and ecological displacement, which often goes hand in hand with "gender, race, sexuality, or immigrant status" (Nixon, 2013:26).

Slow violence, I contend, not only occurs out of sight, it also takes place when violence becomes invisibilised, allowing it to endure over time. Here, gender, race and natural destruction serve as examples. To illustrate my point, we can consider the well-known case of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa, who was "taken to England in 1810 and gained popular attraction as a freak show exhibition for her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, amid popular speculation of her genitalia" (Wiss, 1994:2 quoted in Ras, 2017:n.p.). As Isabella Ras argues, the violence done to Baartman comprised not just one thing but multiple things, which included forcefully removing her from her motherland, stripping her of her identity, and crudely sexualising her by racialising her gender. This kind of treatment was experienced by many women during colonialism and over time it became normalised, and thus invisibilised, which also meant that it continued to function as slow violence and, arguably, still does.

In this chapter I argue that this kind of slow violence can be understood in terms of what Foucault called *governmentality*. As an organising logic, it can sometimes work in tandem with the logic of enclosure, although they ultimately remain different kinds of logic. According to Estela Schindel, governmentality intimately links *place* or ecology and *identity* or ontology because when this kind of logic is employed by a state, for example, to displace communities "with few or no possibilities to find places of shelter", it is enacting a power of indefinite movement that leaves people *adrift* (2019:10). Thinking about governmentality in terms of slow violence thus complexifies other assumptions of violence "as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound" (Nixon, 2013:3). This can be further complicated, as Schindel goes on to suggests, by including Johan Galtung's notion of "indirect or structural violence" (Schindel, 2019:14). which has huge consequences for perceived capacities and affordances. By bringing attention to slow violence, I show how violence can extend over time and across space to have an effect on ontological and ecological manifestations. To begin thinking about reparative strategies, I turn to Sylvia Tamale's (2020) work on Afro-feminism and decolonisation, as well as Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism because they present creative frameworks from which to address and reinvent systems of oppression so that they lose their powers of oppression. Because the main argument of this thesis is ontological rather than merely ethical or epistemological, I argue for a new *logic of* dis*enclosure* or *commoning*.

Commoning, as I understand it, calls for thinking about ontology as multidimensional and perspectival, thus making it capable of incorporating the entirety of life, including human life in all its expressions, such as its gendered expressions. This, I argue, can be justified with reference to many African societies in which third and even fourth genders were

acknowledged. However, I also argue for the ontological right to *opacity* – to not be known or overexposed, as bodies were during colonialism, as seen from the Baartman example. For the decolonial philosopher, writer and poet, Edouard Glissant (1997), opacity goes against the desire to know or lay bare – against even the desire to compel knowing, as was the case with the witch hunts. There are several reasons why Glissant introduced the concept of opacity. One of the reasons was due to colonisation. The colonial rulers introduced the concept of 'borders' which served to enforce some type of enclosure by intentionally separating people according to territorial and political domination, which included the control of the native people/s that were found in that particular area, as well as the exploitation of resources. The 'enclosure' of people also meant that slaves were constantly watched and monitored. Glissant did not believe in imposing cultures, identities or boundaries upon people. He was of the belief that healthy boundaries can be created between people, but that this sometimes meant the right to remain unknown and thus unmonitored. This could enhance their unique individual identity and enforce healthy relations which would allow people to co-exist without any forced assimilation, as was the case during colonial rule (Martins, 2022:83).

Glissant's concept of "opacity" is thus also a critique of colonisation, particularly as the latter relates to the concept of "grasping," which means to seize. The concept of grasping is associated with colonial rule and domination, which in turn is closely linked to the logic of enclosure as pertains to is the seizure of the land and of people. "The concept of grasping is also a strategy of making another readable within the constraints and parameters of white supremacy, heteronormativity, and patriarchy including taxonomies and classifications that seek to create hierarchies of being" (2022:83). That being said, although Glissant argues for the right to opacity, he does so within the framework of *relation.*

Rather than focusing on ontological identity, however, Glissant focuses on relation – which links us back to ubuntu. In *relation*, there is space for unknowability just is there is space for sharing. To develop this argument further, and also to link ontological opacity to ecology, I argue that it is closely related to both the notions of *withdrawal* and *fugitivity*, all of which are important because they leave room for ontological *movement* but not movement that leaves one adrift. That is, there is a difference between fugitivity and being adrift, even though they would seem to be synonyms. Here it helps to turn to the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten who contend that to enter the "undercommons" is not to enter a space as such, but to "inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts" – the "life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons" (2013:28). In other words, rather than indicating being adrift, fugitivity denotes a *logic of escape.*

To link all of the work in this chapter and the previous ones to ubuntu and gender, I address the three sets of questions posed in this chapter in the final concluding chapter. Thus, I show how commoning gender and ubuntu ontologically can alter the capacity of organisms or individuals to perceive affordances or possibilities for action in their ecologies.

1.3 Note on methodology

Besides being a qualitative study in which the relevant literature in the field is analysed, evaluated and synthesised in relation to the problem statement of my own thesis, the thesis should be read as a *cartography.* Cartography differs from geographical mapping which, as John Brian Harley (1988:278–79) has noted, does not merely aim to capture and reproduce geographical information; rather it seeks to produce "refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world" and is, thus, "a form of knowledge and a form of power". Feminist cartography, on the other hand, is *critical mapping* because it highlights "the situatedness and particularity of knowledge" as well as "the possibility for other ways of knowing" without that knowledge being "any less useful or rational" (Shelton, 2022:349). Cartographies also expose and recognise structural asymmetries in ontologies and ecologies, even though it is aimed at decentring theoretical and other hegemonies, as I have done by focusing on the way gender was understood and practised in precolonial Africa. Additionally, cartography lends itself to integrating epistemology, ontology and ethics so that there can be a better understanding of how "ethics, knowing, and being" (Lemke, 2017:97) are reflected in each other and even contain each other. This allows me to argue for an onto-ecology and, later, for an onto-eco-ethics. My hope is that this mapping of gender and ubuntu, as they have unfolded differently in space and time, will foreground the multiple ontologies of the body and the everyday decolonial actions of all genders, but especially racialised ones, and those living in the Global South, as Silvana Martínez and Juan Agüero have done in their article "Cartography of Southern Feminisms: Contributions of Decolonial Feminisms and Community Feminisms" (2023), in which they draw attention to the 'South' as a "metaphor for human suffering systematically caused by colonialism and capitalism" (De Sousa Santos, 2009 quoted in Martínez & Juan Agüero, 2023:843:), although they add *patriarchy* as another intersecting system of oppression. With their emphasis on decolonial and community feminisms, they show the importance and value of indigenous knowledges, as I also do in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Ubuntu and gender: Foundations, challenges, ideals

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to 1) contextualise the term ubuntu and provide a comprehensive definition; and 2) explore the way the gender question relates to the concept and practices of ubuntu with reference to recent literature on the subject. In the context of this research project, the term ‘gender question’ is used as a play on the ‘woman question’ which broadly addresses issues surrounding the societal status and afforded capacities of women from the 1400 to the 1700s, including the “struggle for the higher education of women and the demand for womanhood suffrage” (Spongberg, 2002:130). Movements advocating for these ends “created new interest in women as an historical category” (Spongberg, 2002:130) and mobilised women to reclaim rights which had previously forced that had been taken from them, forcing them into a lower social standing and, concomitantly, normalising this position. The gender question thus represents a more inclusive iteration of the woman question, encompassing not only women and their rights and status but also those of members of the LGBTQI+ community, including gender-nonconforming and nonbinary persons.

Transgender and gender non-conforming people are those whose gender identity does not fully align with the sex they were assigned at birth. “It is also an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth” (American Psychological Association, 2015:832). The term ‘gender non-conforming’ refers to persons “whose external manifestation of their gender identity does not conform to” a particular society’s “expectations of gender roles” (American Psychological Association, 2015:832), where gender roles refer to expectations about how a person should speak, act and dress, for example.

‘Nonbinary’ describes individuals who reject the normative categories of 'man’/’woman’ or ‘male’/’female’. Many societies recognise only two genders, male and female, which is referred to as the gender binary. Non-binary is therefore a term that people use to describe gender fluidity and is therefore not explicitly inclusive of sexual orientation. It is important to note that while some transgender people may identify as non-binary, many do not. Moreover, non-binary is not the same thing as being intersex, which refers to persons whose chromosomes, genitals and/or reproductive organs do not fit neatly into the sex binary.

In summary, ‘gender identity’ focuses on self-categorisation and is distinct from ‘sex’ which is usually assigned at birth: typically boy, girl or intersex (Burn, 2016). Importantly, while gender is distinct from sexual orientation and gender expression, it is also closely related to these. Here, ‘sexual orientation’ refers to who one is attracted to, for example men, women, both sexes, or all sexes; while ‘gender expression’ pertains to the way an individual expresses themselves, including behaviour, appearance, chosen name/s, and preferred pronouns.

Ubuntu is a uniquely African philosophy that is hard to define owing to the ambiguities surrounding the concept and the diverse interpretations in its applications. This philosophy has even succumbed to capitalist recuperation in, for example, marketing campaigns. The term ‘recuperate’ is used here with reference to Guy Debord’s explanation in the situationist manifesto (1957), in which he describes ‘official culture’ as a ‘rigged’ game according to which more conservative or ruling powers forbid subversive ideas from entering directly into public circulation. According to Debord, the powers that be – through media, propaganda and other such techniques – first trivialise and then sterilise these ideas before incorporating them back into mainstream society in this newly diffused form. Similarly, capitalism recuperates ideas and political actions – including notions of ubuntu – to convert them into capital. The consequence of such recuperation is that the original ideas lose much of their primary meaning and force.

Venter argues accordingly that “defining ubuntu is difficult, because the idea of ubuntu is often misused in the political landscape and has fallen victim to the hands of ideologies such as corporate South Africa” (2004:150). Moreover, the concept of ubuntu is often “structured” in “sporadic” and “dangerous ways”, so that the term has come “under immense scrutiny, not only in academia but also in popular media” (2004:149). For Letseka, the concept of ubuntu is difficult to define in English because “defining an African notion in a foreign language” abstracts the concept and removes it from a more “concrete approach”, so defying “the very essence of the African worldview” (2012:51). This is, however, a common translation difficulty and translation theorists have discussed many translation strategies for overcoming this (see, for example, Venuti, 2021). That being said, Molefe argues along similar lines that any “approach that reduces ubuntu to a mere conceptual problem can be deemed as being grossly inadequate” (2014:158). This is because ubuntu describes a living practice that morally guides the behaviour of individuals and communities alike. But, as Molefe adds, rather than simply trying to adequately define ubuntu, we have to “ask questions as to why this question matters, why do we ask this question now, and for whom does this question matter?” (2014:158).

According to Khomba, it is important that we engage with these questions because ubuntu is practised in many countries on the African continent (2011:128). It is therefore an aspect that

is part and parcel of who we are as African people; it is integrated into almost every dimension of our day-to-day lives, and is “shared by all tribes in Southern, central, west and east Africa amongst people of the Bantu origin” (2011:128). Additionally, it is argued that the practising of “ubuntu philosophy unlocks the capacity of an African culture in which individuals express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and communalities” (2011:129). Molefe attests that one of the reasons why ubuntu is important is for us to understand social relationships, as these serve as the best moral instruments to achieve ubuntu. By acknowledging the role that ubuntu plays in society, it becomes easier to identify the salient norms characteristic of a particular place and culture (Molefe, 2019:110). For example, certain cultural values are salient for all African people, such as consensus, the goal of reconciliation and attending to the needs of the individuals in the community. At the heart of ubuntu is the fact that no one can exist in isolation. Once again, this emphasises the interconnectedness that binds us all. Ubuntu can therefore be seen as the basis for fostering positive character traits in individuals (Manda, 2007).

Because ubuntu is difficult to define definitively, there are numerous definitions in the literature, as will become clear below, yet despite this they can all be broadly said to deal with ontology, ethics, communalism, personhood, humanness and morality. Moreover, the concepts function together as a constellation of descriptions and often overlap for this reason, but with some scholars giving more weight to one dimension rather than another. Nevertheless, I will put forward the argument that, overwhelmingly, the literature tends to favour an understanding of ubuntu as a uniquely African moral theory/framework. As a *general moral framework*, we can expect it to deal with questions relating to right and wrong action, moral virtues, justice, and so on. But many philosophers have also argued that it is a *normative* moral framework. As such, we can expect that ubuntu will have some way to guide moral norms and values, which Letseka has argued is the case (2000) and which he outlines more clearly later as “altruism, kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others” (quoted in Letseka 2012:48). In a similar vein, Molefe (2019:100) argues that ubuntu should be understood as a maxim with three dimensions: “ontological personhood, normative personhood, and the means required to achieve normative personhood.” This will be discussed in more detail in the section on personhood, though it seems clear that there is an argument to be made for ubuntu being a normative moral framework. This is especially evident in Metz’s work (2007a; 2007b; 2011; 2012; 2017) in which he has extensively advanced the idea that ubuntu be understood as an African moral theory with normative dimensions. While proffering some provisos, he even contends that ubuntu offers a “promising way to construct

a competitive African moral theory" in terms of "a basic obligation to promote harmonious relationships and to prevent discordant ones" (2017:119).

If ubuntu is not just a moral framework but also a normative one, what is the scope for including gender as an explicit dimension? In some sense, this might seem a trivial question as many feminist theorists have argued decidedly for feminism as not only a moral framework, but a normative moral framework as well. We may think here, for example, of Samantha Brennan, who argues that feminist ethical theories have two main aims, the first being "to achieve a theoretical understanding of women's oppression with the purpose of providing a route to ending women's oppression" and the second being the development of "an account of morality which is based on women's moral experience(s)" (1999:858). The first of these, she argues, is normative while the second descriptive. The latter, she goes on to say, is what broadly counts as particularist, whereas the former is aimed at providing universalist accounts "which are able to ground the normative requirements of feminism" (882). However, as Kimberley Hutchings reminds us, "the normative agenda of feminism is itself a matter of political contestation amongst feminists" (2000:111). Judith Butler, one of the most preeminent philosophers of gender, adds another dimension to this binary by arguing that feminist theory creates its own *gender norms* which restrict "the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice" and, in so doing, "sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (2016:viii). This is evident, for example, in what has been described as TERFism, where TERF is an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminist. The term emerged in 2008 and was used to draw a distinction between transgender-inclusive feminists – or those who think of trans women as real women – and radical feminists who argue for the opposite view. Radical feminism, despite its name, is thus an example of a *normative* moral theory of gender.

Butler's work asks instead: "How do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man?" (2016:xi). That is, if gender is no longer understood in terms of *normative sexuality*, what might we learn about assumptions and prescriptions of what gender 'should be' or 'is' and how this "prevents us seeing other possible ways of life as legitimate, or even imagining such possibilities at all"? (Szorenyi, 2022). While I will show arguments from various camps of feminism, focusing on African feminisms in particular, my aim will be to argue for a non-normative view of gender. The question then becomes: If ubuntu, as I will argue, indeed offers a way forward for constructing a uniquely African moral theory, how does its *normative* implications allow for or clash with Butler's and other feminists' call for a non-normative gender theory? And, if ubuntu can indeed

accommodate a non-normative gender dimension, what would a more explicitly gender-inclusive conception of ubuntu look like theoretically and allow for practically? Finally, how might thinking about a non-normative gender-inclusive theory of ubuntu help us address practical and pressing issues such as ongoing gender discrimination and gender-based violence? To answer these questions, I begin, in this chapter, by providing a comprehensive overview of the definitions and uses of ubuntu, including work that has been done on ubuntu and gender, and then addressing the questions I have posed here in the conclusion to propose a way forward for discussion in this thesis.

2.2 Definitions and broader contemporary uses of ubuntu

Although there are numerous definitions of ubuntu, which I have clustered under the headings of ontology/metaphysics, humanness, communalism, personhood and ethics/morality, Drucilla Cornell and Karin van Marle (2015), like other theorists, have argued that ubuntu "cannot be reduced either to ontology, epistemology, or an ethical value system" (2) because it is, in a sense, all three of these. So, even though I discuss these in a categorised way, the definitions should be understood as constellations of meaning that intersect and overlap.

2.2.1 Ontology/metaphysics

The origin of the term 'ubuntu' "is generally assumed to have originated among African people as part and parcel of their cosmology and implied individual ontology" (Murove, 2014:36). "From a linguistic perspective the term ubuntu comprises the pre-prefix *u-*, the abstract noun prefix *buand*," and the noun stem *-ntu*, meaning person, which translates as personhood or humanness" (Hailey, 2008:3). The root of ubuntu, namely 'ntu', signifies not so much an ancestor who initiated human society as it does a primal cosmological state. The cosmological state is one that is dynamic in which the universe is seen as an inter-dependent whole which encompasses the universal being (ubu) and particular entities (ntu). This inter-connectedness is what makes up the different aspects of existence which would include the relationship between the living and the ancestral realm. As a result, there is a continuous process of be-ing becoming.

So too the prefix 'ubu' is understood not as a specific being, but rather evokes the idea of being, in general, specifying a one-ness. Coetzee and Roux argue that "'ubu' is an enfolded being before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of existence of a particular entity" (2003:272). They add that 'ubu', "as an enfolded being, is always oriented towards unfoldment through particular forms of modes of being" (2003:272) and that the suffix 'ntu' specifies a whole-ness of being. In Coetzee and Roux's words: "'Ubu' and 'Ntu' are not radically separated

and irreconcilably opposed realities. They are mutually founding in a sense that there are two aspects of being as a one-ness and an indivisible wholeness" (2003:272).

Literature on gender as it relates to ubuntu and ontology/metaphysics remains scarce as most work has been done on justice and ethics/morals. However, Okafor *et al*. (2023) bring together Nietzsche's concept of the 'will to power' with Ramose's ubuntu ontology (2003) to argue that intersecting the work of these two philosophers has implications for cross-cultural philosophising, including some that are gender-complementarity. In particular, they see Nietzsche's understanding of the will to power as "basic principle of reality and as deeply rooted in endless becoming" as complementary to Ramose's ontological understanding of ubuntu as the "fundamental principle of being, which is firmly embedded in the notion of becoming, as captured in his idea of "be-ing becoming" (2023:2). In terms of a gender-complementary argument, the authors put forward the argument that a Ramosean ubuntu ontology can "help us realise ourselves as united under the one umbrella of humanity" so that "the tendency for discrimination on the basis of culture, language or skin colour will be reduced to the barest minimum" (16). This, they go on to contend, could "help institute gender sensitivity and balance between the male and the female genders" because in the same way that "ubu and ntu are complementary aspects of the same reality, the male and female genders can, as well, see themselves as complementary aspects of the same humanity" (16). Similarly, the Nietzschean concept of the will to power could "help us to understand that there are no fixed stereotypes with regard to culture, as cultures are dynamic" (17). Furthermore, because Nietzsche's concept is one aimed at critique, it may "equip us with the courage to challenge some of the stereotypes and discrimination going on in society, even at the global level, with reference to culture, language, skin colour and even the concept of gender" (17).

Sylvia Tamale (2020), while largely putting forward a jurisprudence argument, nevertheless touches on ubuntu, ontology and gender in her 2020 book, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism.* In main, she holds that, "as part of the decolonial feminist project, Africa must begin to examine itself and theorize its gender relations through fresh prisms and ontological frameworks; to employ the tool of ubuntu as a mechanism for vigorously engaging with life questions" (2020:227). Also, the "ontological and epistemological knowledge constructions of Indigenous peoples around the world have always understood the complexity, multiplicity and fluidity of humans. Examples of 'third genders' abound in such communities, for example, the *Hijra* of India, the *Muxes* of Mexico, the *Mudoko dako* of Uganda, the *Katoey* of Thailand" and so on (249). While this is a valuable contribution to the argument that a more genuinely African lens is needed for local feminisms, her argument about Western binaries does not take into account the large body of work done in Global North literature to undo these binaries, not only in terms

of gender, but also in terms of the human/non-human/more-than-human continuum (see, for example, the work of Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, etc.). Her argument for a more ontological appreciation of indigenous knowledge structures remains a crucial one and, I would argue, points towards a sphere that still needs much more work. I aim to address this in Chapter 5.

2.2.2 Humanness

In South African languages, the word 'ubuntu' means "humanness" which, in this context, refers to the treatment of other people "with kindness, compassion, respect and care" (Murove, 2014:37). "Ubuntu is commonly referred to as an African humanism" (Hailey, 2008:4), with one of an individual's main goals being to become a human *in full* (Metz & Gaie, 2010:275). This implies that ubuntu is, at least in part, about what qualifies a person to be/become a human being. For Molefe, becoming a human in full requires that one accepts "the mechanisms or technologies of the community that produces, accepts and endorses certain ways of being (living), a process that is accompanied by potential violence" (2014:161).

Gade, on the other hand, relates 'humanness' more directly to an ideology that is part of spiritual and material reconstruction intended to fill the void in meaning and value that was left by the dismantled apartheid regime (2011:317). In other words, the humanistic impetus of ubuntu is "aimed at countering a behaviour that was considered as dehumanizing" (Murove, 2014:37). In this sense, it could be said to be normative because it aims to describe what behaviour 'should' or 'ought to' be. Venter puts this plainly: "The person who thus possesses ubuntu, will in return have certain characteristics such as: being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature and socially sensitive" (2004:150). Ubuntu can thus be defined as "the attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code or behavior, an attitude to other people and to life" (Moruve, 2014:38). In contrast, a failure to "act humanely towards other people" is effectively considered a lack of ubuntu, so that someone who absences ubuntu is not considered to be a human in full (Murove, 2014:38). In Metz and Gaie's words, "one harms others, e.g. by being exploitive, deceptive or unfaithful, or even if one is merely indifferent to others and fails to share oneself with them, then one is said to be lacking ubuntu" (Metz & Gaie, 2010:276). If an individual does not relate well or positively to other people, they may even be "described as animals" (Metz & Gaie, 2010:276; see also Molefe (2014:161 and Murove, 2014:37). Or, as Bell says: "The judgment that a human being is 'not a person,' made on the basis of that individual's consistently morally reprehensible conduct, implies that the pursuit or practice of moral virtue is intrinsic to the conception of a person held in African thought" (2002:64).

Humanness is thus not something that flows naturally from an ubuntu ontology, but a set of "descriptive or even normative claims about being human" (Molefe, 2014:160). This is clearly seen in Desmond Tutu's ubuntu theology according to which human means have to be consistent with human ends (Hailey, 2008:6). The point he is getting at is that "Apartheid not only prevented 'races' from identifying with each other or exhibiting solidarity with one another" but subordinated one to the other by making some people "less human" than others (Metz, 2017). If we now want to see a world in which human dignity is afforded equally to all peoples (the ends), we need to prefigure that future in the here and now (the means).

Humanness would seem, by its definition, to be inclusive of all genders and affording to them the same rights, dignities, etc. Yet, even if this is the ubuntu ideal, it remains the case, as Lindokuhle Gama (2023) argues, that there is a gap "between the idealized Afro-personhood" described in much literature on ubuntu and "socially recognized personhood among African persons", especially given that "heteropatriarchy continues to be an oppressive aspect of" many African societies (2023:9). society. As a result, Afro-personhood, including the humanness described in ubuntu literature, "does not guarantee the ideal of equal moral" or ontological status (9). Heteropatriarchy must therefore be addressed with an understanding that

> Afro-personhood theories separate systems of oppression in its reaction to the West. To be sure, Afro-personhood is rooted in the isolation of one system of oppression, as race, while occluding others, namely gender. As such, the normative theory does not reflect the structural convergence of systems of power. This separability of oppression is premised on centering the essentialized experiences of relatively privileged members of a group. […] This approach distorts the simultaneous oppressions Blackwomxn are subject to. Put differently, Afro-personhood approaches race and gender as exclusive categories. In so doing, they render the qualitative experiences of discriminatory practices against Blackwomxn invisible (Crenshaw, 1991:1245).

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues that Blackwomxn sit at the intersecting point of prevalent systems of power as race, gender, social class, sexuality, ethnicity and age which form mutually constructing features of social organisation (Gama, 2023:14). The Blackwomxn can be described as "the conceptual necessity of announcing" their "intersectional experience" and the daily "micro-aggressions that subtly, but systematically, work to undermine the value of womxn and enforce their secondary social status" (2023:390).However, I would argue that the situation is even more complex, as gender discrimination can take place even within seemingly stable gender categories. Morell, for example, has argued that the concept of masculinity is a "collective gender identity and not a natural attribute. It is socially constructed and fluid. There is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities" (Morrell, 1998:607), just as there are numerous expressions of femininity. Yet, as Raewyn Connell has argued, just as women do

not have the same power and status as all other women, nor of men in general, so too not all men enjoy the same power and status across societal spheres. She defines more dominant expressions of masculinity as *hegemonic masculinity* to refer "to that which constitutes a 'real man' or forms of 'successful masculinity'" (1995:24). Of course, culture "plays a prominent role in setting the standards or norms for masculinity or masculine behaviour", just as it does for other genders. A major characteristic of hegemonic masculinity is that it is closely associated with the oppression of not only women, but more specifically, of other men, particularly those who are considered less masculine than what is seen to be normative. Hegemonic masculinity thus "silences or subordinates other masculinities, positioning these in relation to itself such that the values expressed by these other masculinities are not those that have current legitimacy. It presents its own version of masculinity, of how men should behave and how putative 'real men' do behave, as the cultural ideal" (Morrell, 1998:608). This does not mean that hegemonic masculinity is necessarily violent. Rather, as Morrell contends, it is premised on "the capacity for and threat of violence" which underpins every occasion (1998:609). As may have been surmised, this pertains in particular to homosexuality. Of importance is the need to debunk ideas that homosexuality is a colonial import and therefore unAfrican. It becomes clear, then, that a gender-inflected ubuntu cannot only be about the rights of women, but that it must also address the legacy of the subordination of men of colour and of homosexual Africans. I address this in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

2.2.3 Communalism

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of ubuntu is communalism, as reflected in the isiXhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, "which means a person is a person only through its relationship to other human beings" (Marx, 2002:52; see also Gade, 2011:319). This phrase carries with it important *normative* and *prescriptive* connotations in that they "instruct one to become a real person or to realize one's true self, and to do so by relating to other people in certain ways" (Metz, 2019; see also Metz and Gaie, 2010:275). As Venter says, "[i]nterdependence, communalism, sensitivity towards others and caring for others are all aspects of ubuntu" (2004:152). What this means is that the community shapes and produces the individual inasmuch as the individual is dependent upon the group (Wiredu *et al*., 2004:337). Ubuntu is thus intersubjective at its core, so much so that a person is deemed "incomplete unless he/she maintains an active connection with the society or culture of which he/she is a part of" (Letseka, 2013:352; see also Keevy, 2009:33 and Chisale, 2018:3). For Forster, the relational aspect of ubuntu is the most important determinant of a person's identity because a person's "truest identity comes not just from a moment of encountering another person (called relating): it comes from a continuum of shared being (called having a

relationship)" (2010:9). Partcipating in communal life is, in a sense, equal to participating in life itself, because it creates the conditions of possibility for life – and for the flourishing of life (Forster, 2010:9).

In traditional life, then, the individual does not desire to exist in isolation from other people. Each person owes their existence to other people; each person is viewed as being part of the whole – the whole in this context referring to the community which plays a very big role when it comes to the tradition of ubuntu. This means that there is a "general acceptance that ubuntu is characterized by a preference for co-operation and group work than individual competitiveness" (Hailey, 2008:8). Participation is thus normative, just as the values it is guided by are normative because care, respect, compassion and consensus are understood as constitutive of the "wholeness of human life" (Chisale, 2018:4; see also Enslin and Horsthemke, 2004:548). Ramose goes as far as to contend that "wholeness is the regulative principle here since what is asserted is that the single individual is incomplete without the other" (2015:69). In its promotion of "social interdependence and a deep rootedness in community" (Letseka, 2012:48), ubuntu thus aims to ensure that the individuals in a society and the society as a whole develop the capacity to create a meaningful life (Venter, 2004:152; see also Metz, 2014:71).

Given that the communal aspect of ubuntu is associated with care and that care is greatly valued in feminism, it would seem a natural place for 'marriage' between gender and ubuntu. Sinenhlanhla Chisale argues, however, that the tendency to gender caregiving is misguided, as care, from an ubuntu perspective, is rather a "regular normative" (2018:1). She continues by saying that "men also display strong tendencies of care in African communities" (Chisale, 2018:1); however, even if true, it should be said that her argument is not substantiated, nor is it contextualised in its relations to dominant patriarchal tendencies prevalent in many African societies, as discussed before. In addition, it does not address the status of women or attitudes towards homosexual and trans persons. Further to this, as Mangena has contended, even ubuntu itself is deeply implicated in practices of patriarchy and in need of an African feminist ethic that can provide women with strategies "to fight patriarchy inside out" (2009:28). As a result, African women and gender nonconforming people often find themselves in a position where they have to comply with patriarchal rules and assumptions "without thought or critique" (Keevy, 2009:41).

Besides the normative assumptions embedded in ideas of women as caregivers, and even 'natural' caregivers, the misinterpretation pointed to by Chisale may have occurred in part due to the fact that feminists have developed a fairly comprehensive body of work on feminist care ethics, for example *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan (1982), *Caring* by Nel Noddings

(1986), and the article, “Maternal Thinking” by Sara Ruddick (1980). In these initial explorations, care ethics was “conceived as providing an alternate frame to the justice-oriented moral theories of utilitarianism, deontology, and rights theory that then predominated in Western philosophy” (Keller & Kittay, 2017:540). This brought the focus back to issues of “mothering; abortion decisions; caring for the sick, elderly, disabled; and caring within intimate relations” which “had been largely neglected by dominant moral theories” because they were considered part of the ‘private’ sphere and thus viewed as an individual concern. From the mid-1990s onwards, care theorists began to “draw attention to the fact that our social and political life is dependent both on the labor of care and the ethics that accompanies such labor” and that care should, therefore, be retheorised in its relations to justice, for example (Keller & Kittay, 2017:544). This led to new normative theories of care as a virtue, but was also shown later to be an important dimension of sociopolitical philosophy, which had the consequence that “questions of caring” were “no longer set in opposition to questions of justice” because this could now be framed instead as asking how caring can be just and how justice, for its part, can be caring (Keller & Kittay, 2017:546).

After 2010, understandings and theories of care were expanded beyond its gendered determinations as being feminine. Tronto (2013), for example, expanded the virtue of care to police work and firefighting, predominantly understood as ‘male’ spheres of work. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that a number of theorists argued for associations between gender and care to be abandoned all together which, as Keller and Kittay argue, had both promising and troubling consequences. “Troubling in that women still do most of the care work around the globe”, which means that a “de-gendered conception of care risks losing the political importance of the place of care in actual women’s lives” (Keller & Kittay, 2017:547). At the same time, they argue that this decoupling is promising “in that care is, after all, an important (albeit frequently marginalized) human value”, meaning the de-gendering of the concept “facilitates the recognition of care as a universal moral value” (Keller & Kittay, 2017:547). There has also been research “into similarities between African moralities and care ethics and between Confucian ethics and care ethics”, which indicates “that care has not always been conceived and carried out as a distinctively feminine practice” (Keller & Kittay, 2017:547). In particular, they mention ubuntu which recognises care as a universal normative feature of morality, as argued for by Chisale.

One may wonder, at this point, whether the individuality of the individual is entirely overlooked in settings of communalism as advocated for by ubuntu. The simple answer to this is *no* as there is a continuous dialogue – an intertwining – between the individual and the community (Nafukho, 2006:110). As such, ubuntu does not reduce the individual to a static figure, neither

to a number or type of conduct. Instead, it is purported to acknowledge and respect every individual in a given society, even though it requires that individuals in turn acknowledge the importance of community. So, just as the identity of the individual is not lost in its dialogue with the community, it is hoped that the individual will give back to the community through their own good deeds and gestures. Coetzee and Roux (2003:252) argue accordingly that it is "the community which forms the individual". A critical aspect that can be grasped from this is that "the self or 'I' is defined in terms of 'we' existence" (Louw, 1998:252). But is this 'we' really that inclusive? Louise Vincent and Simon Howell's survey of homophobic discourse in South Africa found, for example, that despite human rights there is still widespread homophobia which centres on "three potent legitimising tropes – homosexuality as 'unAfrican', 'unGodly', and 'unnatural'" (2014:472). Representing homosexuality as unAfrican implies, first of all, that same-sex relations are a colonial import – a view which has been debunked by numerous gender scholars, Epprech's work being exemplary. But it is a more complex discursive strategy than this may suggest because even though it "raises the spectre of colonisation and the suppression of African traditions, languages and ways of life under white supremacy" (479), African homophobia is further legitimised by underscoring the importance of godliness to African communities. The logic is thus that, if homosexuals are ungodly, it does not go against ubuntu to exclude them from what is considered the community. Still, South Africa remains "an exception in the African continent when it comes to rights related to gender and sexuality as the "majority of the nations in Africa consider same-sex or other non-normative relationships as a crime" (Gomes da Costa Santos, 2013:314). However, homosexuality is not always accepted on a social/communal level. South African government officials too have expressed homophobic sentiments. For example, the former president of the Republic of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, expressed homophobic remarks at his MK (uMkhonto weSizwe) rally in 2024. He criticised the legalisation of same-sex relations because he viewed these relations as a disgrace to Zulu culture. He lured voters to vote for him by suggesting that he would do away with laws that people never supported but were forced upon them. This highlights the reality that exists in South Africa even though same-sex marriages are legally recognised.

Many African leaders, including former Namibian president Sam Nujoma, former Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, and the current Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, have been outright homophobic, describing homosexuality "as having been brought into Africa by former Western colonial powers (Phillips, 1997), contrary to historical research evidence (Epprecht 1998) and accounts from black lesbian and gay people (Gevisser and Cameron 1995)" (Gomes da Costa Santos, 2013:314). Sparking international outrage, Museveni, as recently as 2023, promulgated harsh anti-LGBTQ+ laws according to which the death penalty can be

received for homosexual acts (Okikor, 2023). As a practical ethics – a point expanded on in a later section – it would seem to me that the decriminalisation of same-sex relations may be a more important bridge than care for thinking about ubuntu, community and gender. This, too, is an argument I will expand on in this thesis.

2.2.4 Personhood

Closely related to both humanness and community is the notion of personhood in ubuntu. In African philosophy, it is not always the case that 'person' and 'personhood' can be used interchangeably as the meanings of these concepts often depend on the context in which they are used. For a clearer understanding of the notion of 'person', both ontological and normative accounts are needed. The ontological account, as implied, looks at the organisation or structure and nature of Being/being, while the normative view takes into account the moral being-ness of a person. Thus, while the being of a person, as part of the larger Being-ness of the cosmos, is taken as given, personhood, or the moral being-ness of an individual, is understood as a process that must be nurtured in an individual from birth so that, through an ever-evolving progression, full personhood can eventually be attained (Hailey, 2008:9; see also Gade, 2011:303). Here, as with the other dimensions, we find a normative aspect as it is assumed that an individual who fails to act according to the dictates of ubuntu will not acquire their status as a person in full because the moral foundation of personhood lies precisely in the kind of relation a person has with their community. As Matolino puts it, personhood is about "how the individual conducts him/herself and how he/she relates to other people in his/her personal interactions and with the community at large" (2008:51). Similarly (Metz, 2011:537; see also Higgs, 2008:12), this can be interpreted in at least two ways, namely that one becomes a moral person 1) when one honours communal relationships; or 2) when one realises one's true self by respecting the value of relationships – different ways of thinking about this is in terms of *affordances.*

In general, affordances "are opportunities for action" (Peter, 2023:1948) which can be harmful or beneficial, or even neutral. Affordances also refer to "relations between human or non-human animals and their environment, where the relation determines possible actions" (Peter, 2023:1953). This relational view seems wholly in line with ubuntu; instead of simply determining which actions are possible or better (i.e. less harmful), moral affordances in this instance also determine the conditions of possibility for personhood. This is because affordances determine – even contingently – the functions, roles and constraints that an environment or situation structurally provides for and places upon situated subjects (Davis & Chouinard, 2016:241).

As a convention that is socially constrained and defined by roles and functions, it seems fair to argue that gender, as a social and historical category rather than a biological fact, offers certain structural and non-structural affordances to situated subjects. Men, for example, enjoy benefits from patriarchal systems. Non-structurally, they are generally stronger than women because of hormones and other biological determinants. If ubuntu is indeed patriarchal, if not in its ideal form but in its practical instantiations, then it would naturally allow more affordances for men than women. But this argument is not as straightforward as it may seem because, as African feminist scholar Ifi Amadiume has argued in her seminal work, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (2005), gender was more fluid and complementary in traditional African cultures than after colonialism – a view supported by Epprecht and Tamale and shown earlier. More precisely, her argument is that "gender differences" do not necessarily "connote gender inequalities" (Oyowea & Yurkivska, 2014:95). Oyowea and Yurkivska contend, however, that the asymmetries between genders described by Amadiume as the 'male daughters, female husbands' custom belies the "gender inequality and hierarchy" so "deeply ingrained in" this tradition of the Nnobi community "that Amadiume takes them for granted and hence is blind to them to the extent of condoning the traditional acceptance of male control over women" (Oyowea & Yurkivska, 2014:95). That is, what Amadiume describes as *normative* is actually "a rare exclusion from the traditional male dominance that was granted and available only to women of a certain class and personal wealth" despite the "seductive power of the idea of gender complementarity" in Amadiume's work (Oyowea & Yurkivska, 2014:95).

It would seem, then, that the notion of personhood, as an indispensable dimension of African and ubuntu communitarianism, cannot be gender-neutral, as Oyowea and Yurkivska argue convincingly, and that the relational aspect of personhood, including its gender-specific ones, need further scrutiny if we are to propose a genuinely gender-inclusive theory of ubuntu. Perhaps a better way of phrasing this is that ubuntu, rather than espousing a general and abstract view of personhood, should move towards a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered because only then can affordance be better understood as it relates to gendered personhood. This is an argument I develop extensively in this thesis.

2.2.5 Ethics and/or morality

Finally, we arrive at what I understand all the other dimensions of ubuntu discussed here are moving towards – at least in much of the literature on ubuntu – namely ethics/morality. In ubuntu, morality is defined in terms of a "communal or group rationality", meaning a collective morality is taken into account rather than that of the individual (Mangena, 2012:1). Weight is thus given to "the supreme value of society, [and] the primary importance of social or

communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual" (Molefe, 2016:24). This is not to say that there is no recognition of the individual. According to Louw (1998:4), "ubuntu's respect for the particularity of the other, links up to its respect for individuality". The point is that ubuntu "recognises the power intrinsic to the capacity for dialogue and it places the community at the centre of all moral deliberations which are located on the idea of communal or group rationality" (Mangena, 2012:1). As a moral theory, ubuntu serves to provide a cohesive moral framework and normative values in the face of adversity (Letseka, 2012:54). Thus, ubuntu can also refer to "a positive ethical moral way of being in relation with others" (Venter, 2004:152). For Letseka, ubuntu "is a theory of right action, as it is the most justified normative theory of right action that has an African pedigree and is the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity" (2012:54).

Metz and Gaie elaborate on how an individual should act morally in the community. "Ubuntu implies that it would be inappropriate invariably to tackle interpersonal moral dilemmas in a purely impartial way. Instead, the fact that certain people are related to the agent in a communal way can provide some reason to resolve conflicts of interest in one way rather than another" (2010:282). In a traditional African society, if an individual has committed an offence against someone in the community, the punishment is not retributive or preventative but rather, according to the ubuntu principle, one of reconciliation, which ensures the restoration of broken relationships. When conflict arises, the aim is to restore and mend relations between the individuals, that is, between the offender and the victim. This promotes a harmonious environment as it allows less harm to occur, promoting or seeking restorative justice (Metz & Gaie, 2010:278).

In summary, an ubuntu ethics can be said to be guided by compassion and benevolence (Hailey, 2008:2, 23), as well as goodness, generosity and graciousness (Gade, 2011:316). Chitando goes as far as to say that ubuntu can "heal most of the pressing ethical challenges of our time" (Chitando, 2015:269). However, even though it is an ethic that sets out normative standards for the collective, it cannot be seen as an abstract concept or theory because it is part and parcel of every aspect of African life and has been for many years. "It encapsulates the way of life of African people through expressions such as collective singing, pain, sharing, hospitality, rites of passage, celebrations, etc." (Msengana, 2006:85). This sharing of heritage plays a critical role in shaping a person's understanding of where they come from and, from this, where they are going. More important is that it is deeply rooted in African ideas and ideals (Venter, 2004:152). In other words, ubuntu is an indigenous ethic "produced by indigenous African people" that "entails a way of doing from an African perspective" (Maluleka, 2019). As

an indigenous knowledge system, ubuntu has a holistic aspect that is expressed through its cosmological dimension according to which the spiritual and material aspects of existence are intimately connected and exist on a continuum. This implies also that the values, attitudes, and behaviours of people are influenced and shaped by their predecessors so that "group solidarity" is emphasised once more as being "central to the survival of African communities" (Khomba, 2011:128).

Inasmuch as ubuntu has been met with positivity and has been praised in African societies – it has even been tied to issues of liberation, development and identity (see, for example, Dolamo, 2013:1) – it has also been criticised for being vague, pre-scientific and irrelevant for modern society (Viviers & Mzondi, 2014:2). Some even view ubuntu as an elitist creation, "similar to other utopian ideas like African socialism, African communitarianism and consciencism" (2014:7). And, given some of the issues related to gender highlighted thus far, such as its historical patriarchal bias, is it possible for ubuntu to truly be considered an egalitarian African ethical framework? Or does ubuntu itself need to be decolonised to transform its ontology of bodies? Drucilla Cornell and Karin van Marle's argument for what they call *ubuntu feminism* (2015) addresses these questions in part. As I have mentioned, they make clear from the outset, and based on interviews, that ubuntu "cannot be reduced either to ontology, epistemology, or an ethical value system" because it is, in a sense, all three of these. What they are interested in, however, is whether ubuntu, "as critical response would be one that unsettles and opens, rather than [simply] unites and confines" (4), particularly in terms of feminism. In reference to some critics of ubuntu, they rightly point out that part of the problem is that ubuntu is often conflated with "outdated modes of social cohesion and hierarchies" or reduced to an "ethical ontology of a purportedly shared world" as found in Masolo's argument of 'participatory difference' (2004) which, while recognising that "each one of us is indeed different from all other people" fails to take into account the most crucial aspect of this difference, namely the "activism inherent in making a difference" (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015:2). But can ubuntu provide such a framework of struggle and activism needed for recognising difference and making a difference? To develop their argument, Cornell and Van Marle reference literature on spatiality, particularly the spatial turn's focus on one's own sense or consciousness of being situated or embedded "in space, as well as spatial divisions, partitions, and borders" (Tally, 2013:14 quoted in Cornell & Van Marle, 2015:7). In thinking about ubuntu feminism and spatiality, these authors note that spatiality, as theorised in recent literature, is about far more than geography and should be understood accordingly as "configurations of social relations" (7), as well as their spatial distributions across time, such as is the case with ancestors in many African cultures.

Relatedly, feminist spatial theorists “have engaged critically with the traditional distinctions between public and private, universal and local, and women’s placement with the latter of these pairs” which echoes many concerns that ubuntu theorists have raised concerning care and justice. Andreas Phillippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, for example, has argued for what he calls “spatial justice” which, in contrast to distributive or social justice, “does not involve processes of consensus, rational dialogue, renegotiation of territory, demos, agency, or even identity formation” (Phillippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2014:175, quoted in Cornell and Van Marle, 2015:7) but understands justice rather as the ‘opening up’ of “the space of conflict between various bodies finding themselves in the lawscape” (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015:7). In other words, it is a way in which “a body can question the emplacement of itself as well as other bodies: by withdrawing from an atmosphere of fixed positions” (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015:7) and it is precisely in terms of the notion of *withdrawal* – not wholly unlike Moten and Harney’s concept of *fugitivity*, which I take up in the final chapter – that the authors argue for an understanding of ubuntu as critique, and ubuntu feminism as an “ethical aspiration of living together in a shared world and of being embedded in relationships” that imply “simultaneity and multiplicity”, which includes “the traditional distinctions between public and private, universal and local, and women’s placement with the latter of these pairs”, not only as gendered bodies, but also as racial ones (7).

Returning to the question I asked at the outset, namely whether ubuntu can accommodate a non-normative gender dimension, it seems to me that it may be possible, but that certain conditions will need to be met. The first is a more ontological appreciation of indigenous knowledge structures, with the proviso that it is open to a more nuanced view of personhood which, rather than being general and abstract, can provide a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered, and as racially gendered. Only then, I would argue, can ubuntu, as a normative moral framework, allow for a non-normative gender dimension that would, through a thorough understanding of critique, withdrawal and fugitivity, be practically capable of better theorising affordance and addressing issues such as hegemonic masculinity, gender-based violence, the decriminalisation of same-sex relations and the de-patriarchalisation of ubuntu to be addressed. This, then, is what I aim to do by the end of this thesis.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to examine the term ‘ubuntu’ by providing a comprehensive overview of definitions covered in the literature. Ontologically, I showed that ubuntu is both a cosmological and individual ontology, though these should be understood as co-constitutive rather than as separate domains. Thus, the individual can be said to be enfolded in the

cosmological just as the cosmological can be said to be oriented towards unfoldment into particular forms of modes of being. As an African humanism, ubuntu has universal and particular dimensions, with the former referring to the universal goal of individuals to become a human *in full* and the latter speaking to more local concerns, such as Gade's interpretation of humanness as an ideology aimed at the spiritual and material reconstruction of humans in the wake of violent legacies such as those of colonialism and apartheid. I showed, moreover, that in traditional life, ubuntu is characterised by a preference for cooperation and communal obligation, rather than individual competitiveness. Accordingly, participation can be understood as normative because it stipulates a regulative principle that promotes interconnectedness, communal relations and interdependence, as reflected in the maxim *unumtu ngumuntu ngabantu*, directly translated to "a person is a person through other people". Thus, the relations between the individual and the community are emphasised because an individual attains full personhood, or becomes a human in full, through the community. I argued that a different way of thinking about this is in terms of *affordances* or the functions, roles and constraints that an environment or situation structurally provides for and places upon situated subjects. As a convention that is socially constrained and defined by roles and functions, I reasoned that gender, as a social and historical category rather than a biological fact, offers certain structural and non-structural affordances to situated subjects. Drawing on the work of Oyowea and Yurkivska, I contended that rather than espousing a general and abstract view of personhood, ubuntu should instead articulate a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered, because only then can affordance be better understood as it relates to gendered personhood. Finally, I showed that it is clear from the existing literature that ubuntu is an important African moral framework in that it provides guidance for how people *should* behave, what their values *should be*, how their beliefs *ought to* be practised, and what their general way of life *should* look like. This includes the promotion of kindness, respect, hospitality, group solidarity, understanding and generosity. I argued, however, that even though ubuntu is an ethics that sets out normative standards for the collective, it is a normative ethics that emerges from practical everyday African life, as expressed through rituals and rites of passage. That is, it is an indigenous knowledge system with a holistic aspect that is expressed through its cosmological dimension, according to which the spiritual and material aspects of existence are intimately connected and exist on a continuum.

This does not, however, mean that ubuntu is without flaws or that it addresses and caters for every individual, despite this being its ideal. As noted, the patriarchal biases of ubuntu poses challenges for African women as well as gender non-conforming people. The communal aspect of ubuntu is thus in need of better definition as its current characterisations do not make

clear who exactly is welcomed and who is not, especially given the prevalence of notions that homosexuality is unAfrican and ungodly. This raises the 'gender question' – a play on the 'woman question' which refers broadly to questions centred on the societal status and afforded capacities of women from the 1400 to the 1700s, including women's suffrage and education. However, the gender question is a more inclusive iteration of the woman question, including not only women and their rights and status, but also those of members of the LGBTQI+ community, including gender-nonconforming and nonbinary persons. This is especially important given the widespread belief that homosexuality is a colonial import. It would seem then that what is required next is a comprehensive overview – at least as comprehensive as a doctoral thesis allows for – of gender relations in precolonial and postcolonial Africa. Without such contextualisation, I would argue that the ontological issue of gender, as well as its material instantiations, will not be adequately addressed. In the next chapter, I provide such an overview with the aim of setting the scene for a better understanding of responses to gender-related oppressions, both in Global North and Global South feminisms.

2.3.1 Cartographic reflection of Chapter 2

This cartography reflects on the notion of "participation" in ubuntu which, as I have shown, is normative in that is stipulates a regulative principle that promotes interconnectedness, communal relations and interdependence, as reflected in the maxim *unumtu ngumuntu ngabantu*, directly translated to "a person is a person through other people". Thus, the relations between the individual and the community are emphasised because an individual attains full personhood, or becomes a human in full, through the community. However, as I argue at length in this thesis, just because this is the *ideal* does not mean that it looks like this in *practice,* as becomes clear when thinking about gender and sexuality. Thus, I argued that relationality should be thought of in terms of *affordances*; that is, the functions, roles and constraints that an environment or situation structurally provides for and places upon situated subjects. "Affordance" thus allows for a new understanding of ubuntu ideals like "personhood", "humanness", and so on.

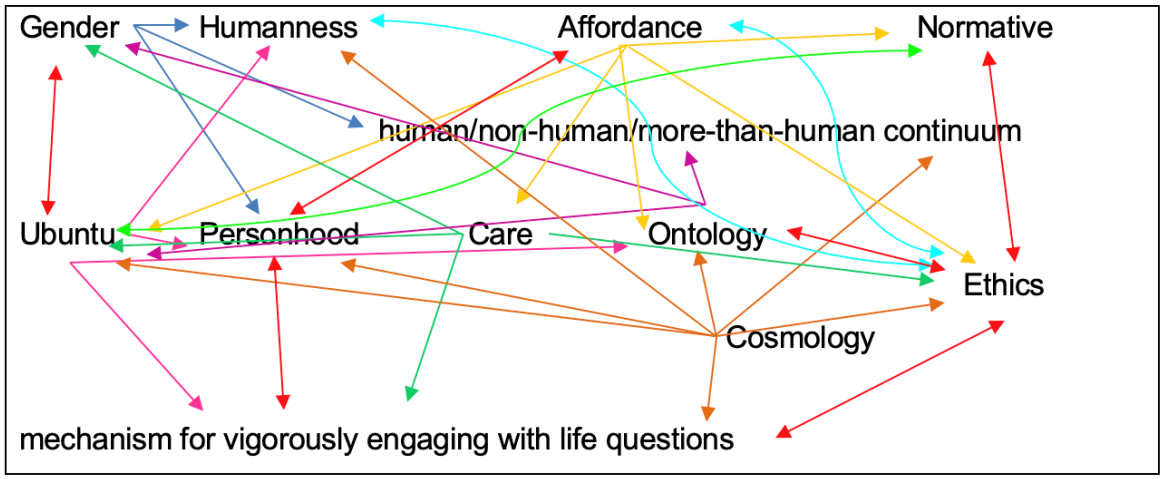

Figure 1: Cartographic reflection of Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Gender in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa

3.1 Introduction

In the first chapter, I outlined my aims for this study, namely: 1) contextualising the term 'ubuntu' and providing a comprehensive definition; and 2) thinking about how the gender question fits within the concept and practices of ubuntu with reference to recent literature on the subject. As I showed, ubuntu is a distinctively African ideology, although it is difficult to describe because of the word's ambiguity and the range of interpretations in its uses. A better way of thinking about this is as ubuntu having various dimension such as ontology, humanness and personhood, and communalism, all of which function together to provide a general and normative moral framework for being in the world. We can anticipate that, as a general moral framework, it will address issues like fairness, moral qualities, right and wrong behaviour, and so on. As a normative moral framework, we can expect that ubuntu will have some means of directing moral standards and values, which have been described in the literature as goodness, altruism, compassion, kindness, benevolence, respect, and so on.

Ontologically, I showed that the cosmos, the community and the individual are co-constitutive as aspects of being as an indivisible wholeness or one-ness. Ubuntu, which means 'humanness', also implies that one of an individual's main goals is to become a human *in full*. This is closely related to personhood, which has ontological and moral dimensions, with the former taking account of the nature of Being/being, and the latter implying a normative account of the ethical being-ness of a person. Both humanness and personhood are directly related to the ontological dimension of ubuntu, as well as the communal one, showing that we should understand these dimensions as part of a constellation of meanings that function together. Communalism, as I argued, is reflected in the isiXhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which can be translated as "a person is a person only through its relationship to other human beings". Ubuntu is thus at its core intersubjective, so much so that a person is deemed incomplete if they fail to maintain an active connection with their society or culture.

Within each of these dimensions, I began to discuss some issues related to gender that I will take up in the rest of this thesis. These include decolonisation, care, what counts as community, whether homosexuality is unAfrican, and so on. To contextualise the issues raised, in this chapter I provide a comprehensive overview – at least as comprehensive as a

doctoral thesis allows for – of gender relations in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa, while giving an overview of gender in other parts of the world where gender relations have changed as a result of capitalism or colonialism in the next chapter. In terms of the latter, I focus in particular on the witch hunts that took in many parts of Europe as to show how these "polymorphous technique[s]" were used, not only in Africa, as a set of complex, diverse and "regulatory procedures" to create and shape "uneven geography[ies] of dispossession" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:3) by intervening especially in "spheres of production and social reproduction" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:6) – which Silvia Federici develops extensively in her theorisation of free gendered labour as I show.

My reason for including African and non-African histories is to show that although the problem of the body – and especially of the gendered body – is complex and diverse and should thus be understood in terms of *multiple ontologies*, they also overlap in some ways. Oliver Harris and John Robb argue, for example, that by the 1990s, theorists had become "critically aware" of the problem of ontology as "a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other" (2012:668). What this meant was that even though "ontological critics" contended "that people may hold different ontologies", in practice many of their analyses still tended "both to see ontological beliefs as normatively shared uniformly among members of a group and to dichotomize the gap between Westerners and non-Westerners in terms of opposed, heuristic ideal types" (668). How, then, are we to understand different bodies, such as medieval bodies which were understood to be microcosms reflecting "the perfection of God's creation and divine order", as well as constitutive of "the Galenic system of humors" (671); or the shamanic body that is said to have the capacity to turn into the body of an animal; or even the body of the witch? What these examples illustrate is that the *material practices* of ontologies are often quite different from the "rather crystalline intellectual systems" (671) in which they are outlined theoretically. This is true even of ubuntu, with its ideal and practical contradictions such as the ideal of an egalitarian community and its heteropatriarchal practices. Moreover, while ubuntu is surely a uniquely African moral framework, it would be erroneous – and even dangerous – to think that it has had no outside influences, as cross-cultural contact has always existed and continues to take place. Many Black liberation scholars even argued for this. Frantz Fanon, for example, explicitly argued for an internationalism, though it was an internationalism that emerged "from Southern, Black or subaltern spaces" (Kipfer, 2022:1640). In other words, cultural 'pollution' cannot be reduced to colonialism, even though colonialism can be said to have had a more sustained and violent influence. However, even violent conflict existed before colonialism, though what made colonialism different was its sustained, systematic and systemic violence against people of colour, as well as against gendered bodies. The point I

am trying to make is that the diverse and intersecting histories of the gendered body point towards multiple ontologies at any given time, which, while impossible to recount in their entirety, should at least be kept in mind when proposing new articulations thereof, as I intend doing with ubuntu. The way in which I will do this is through the feminist methodology of *cartography.* Alice Finden (2024) argues, for example, that counter-mappings of hegemonic archives can be viewed as a decolonial feminist research method.

3.1.1 Counter-mapping

In his 1988 chapter, "Maps, Knowledge and Power," Harley attests to the fact that geographical maps do not only contain geographical information about location but are also "refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world," meaning they also show something about power relations (278–279). This is confirmed by Scott who says that the earliest maps added "documentary intelligence to state power" (1998:39). For the most part of history, what this has meant is the reflection of Western and colonial powers. In theoretical spaces, maps can also be used to show what is missing from original maps. Such counter-mapping practices challenge dominant ideas about the world and has been used by feminists and other marginalised communities to reveal their own histories.

A good example of this is the Decolonial Atlas Project. As they explain on their website, cartography "has been a significant tool in the expropriation of Indigenous lands at every stage of enclosure," (Words are Monuments, 2022:n.p.) as I discuss at length in Chapter 4. They go on to say that their counter-mapping is a "commitment to mapping for the common good" (Words are Monuments, 2022:n.p.) and can, therefore, be seen as a method of disenclosure, which I discuss in Section 5.3, where I also explain how fugitivity and opacity can be seen as counter-mapping strategies aimed at disenclosure.

By using a participatory and collaborative approach in her work on counter-mapping, Finden adds to the methodological debates through the development and presentations of participatory interviews. It is through this approach that she adds to the decolonial feminist archival method (2024:462). Her method involved "inviting participants to annotate and 'counter-map' a British colonial map taken from the British Library archives. This method investigated the persistent colonial logics in present-day British and Egyptian counter terrorism and security practice, and how these formed through race, gender, sexuality and class dynamics" (2024:462). The counter-mapping process is important because it also produced "a generative space for new knowledge to emerge from the marginalised subject position" (2024:462). As a feminist method, it also focuses on intersectionality as it places emphasis on race, sexuality, gender and class. It also places a focus on the individuals who are affected

(both male and female). The aim of this method was to create a decolonial space in which participants could identify alternative ontological and affective forms of knowledge. This resulted in an interrogation of colonial truth claims and a presentation of alternative truth (Finden, 2024:463). “She presents a new decolonial and feminist method that adds methodological and conceptual insights to the discipline of politics and the sub-fields of decolonial study and gender studies” (2024:463). One may ask, *how does the concept of counter-mapping contribute to the decolonial feminist scholarship?*

Counter-mapping is important as it contributes to the decolonial feminist scholarship by allowing us to challenge the existing colonial narratives. In so doing, we are able to engage with these narratives and to re-interpret the hegemonic colonial truths, while also playing a role in dismantling the colonial powers. The re-interpretation of the narrative allows individuals to have a different perspective on the colonial narrative that changes their view and understanding of what it means to have a life that is meaningful and fulfilling.

The method used in this study in attempting to understand ubuntu and gender was therefore the feminist method of cartography as indicated in the preceding paragraphs. This method was deemed important and useful in my study because it enabled me to consider the intersecting histories (such as colonialism) of the gendered body, pointing towards multiple ontologies at any given time. These histories should not be overlooked, but they require us to engage with them in dialogue so that we can develop a different meaning and understanding of people’s lived experiences. This method emphasises intersectionality by advocating for an inclusion of diverse perspectives. These perspectives could be those of women, marginalised individuals of the LGBTQI+ community, as well as those of gender non-conforming people. This method is important because it allows us to engage in dialogue about colonisation and its effects on people. It helps us to re-interpret history by taking into consideration people’s lived experiences before, during and after colonisation. It allows us to look at the impact that it might have had on gender, race, sexuality and power struggles, while looking specifically at the categories of man and woman. By employing the feminist method of cartography, I aimed to explore the subtle mechanisms and technologies in relation to gendered relations in Africa in which the mapping practice recognises lived and personal experiences and creates an environment that is safe even for minority groups. The aim thereof is to create an inclusive space that also challenges traditional power structures and to attempt to promote equality and social justice.

3.2 Gender in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa

Gender, like race, can be defined as a social construction, meaning the roles and responsibilities, obligations, values and attributes, and power associated with the different genders, especially the categories MAN and WOMAN, are invented but become stabilised, normalised and accepted over time. Once this takes place, these relatively stable gender categories begin to predetermine the actions, obligations, roles and the like associated with these categories. Agbaje (2019:6) argues accordingly that gender can be defined as "a matrix of performed identities, behaviours and power relations that are associated with one sex". As such, gender should be understood as something that is socially constructed and reconstructed in time. That is, it is tied to particular places and times and is not universal in its ontologies, epistemologies or ethics. By theorising gender as something more, and outside of gendered categories, feminists have produced a large body of work to show that categories like WOMAN and MAN constitute an "entire system of regulation" that has, at times, and even continues to, erase "non-western practices of gender and sexuality" in its misapprehension of the "distribution of social and political vulnerabilities' (Finden, 2024:466). It is particularly in relation to this that the work of decolonial scholars like Maria Lugones (2010) and Saidiya Hartman (2008) have helped to create a more "holistic picture of the subtle mechanisms of colonial power through intersecting technologies of gender, race and class" (466-467). In this section, I aim to explore these subtle mechanisms and technologies in relation to gendered relations in Africa. In particular, I look here at the transition from precolonial practices to colonial ones.

The African continent hosts a diverse range of cultures and social forms, so it should come as no surprise that sex patterns and relations are equally varied. This was not only accomplished through labels, however, but also through the division of work. This still takes place today with women being confined to rural homesteads and bearing the responsibilities of childrearing, cooking, cleaning, etc., while men, tasked with being the 'provider' of the family, travels to nearby – or not so nearby – towns and cities for work. Gender itself is understood and expressed in many different ways across the globe. In the Swahili language, for example, "the gender of a person cannot be indicated grammatically through the use of pronouns because all of the pronouns are gender neutral and instead indicate the noun class of the person or object being referred to" (Murray & Roscoe, 1998:39). Thus, there is a need to better understand how gender was 'practised' in Africa and elsewhere despite such linguistic peculiarities. In particular, it was the introduction of Christianity that reshaped understandings of gender in Africa. This is clear from the example of Lesotho when missionaries took it upon themselves to compile words and dictionaries on behalf of the African natives. In some

instances, the dictionaries would include words that described sexual acts or named specific genders. In doing so, these labels changed what constituted 'gender' for African people, and even how gender was practised. "In some cases," as Murray and Roscoe argue, "African homosexual behaviour was linked to the specific conditions created by colonial rule and racial capitalism" (Murray & Roscoe, 1998:198). Bouka (2020:4) similarly holds that "the European social construction of gender imposed during the colonial encounter influenced not only African societies, but also how national movements unfolded. European inspired division of masculine power and feminine domesticity shaped African politics throughout the twentieth century".

During precolonial times, African sexuality was viewed as being sacred – as that which existed for the purpose of procreation and the strengthening of the ancestral lineage of a family. In many African cultures, sexual education was communicated through song, dance and proverbs, practices which would become radically changed and even eviscerated during the colonial years as the bodies of African women and men alike became more sexualised. Because of this sexualisation, policies were in place during the colonial years to change and control the gendered norms and sexual practices of Africans (Agbaje, 2019:9). According to Amoah-Boampong and Agyeiwaa "there was an absence of gender in the pronouns gender" in West African communities, as in Swahili (2021:3). This does not mean that no gendered relationships existed, but that West African societies were organised rather according to kinship or group relations. These kinship ties were created and derived from consanguinity, marriage or adoption. Furthermore, as Bouka has argued, "sex and gender did not always coincide" in African societies but neither did "fluidity in some relations between the sexes" necessarily shield women from being subjected to "un-equal power relations" (2020:6). To say that gender was more fluid or practised in less regimented ways in Africa before colonialism does thus not mean there was a general egalitarianism.

As many studies indicate, homosexuality seems to be a universal phenomenon and was as prevalent in Africa as anywhere else. The term 'homosexual' is not indigenous to Africa. It is a word that developed around the 19th century in the West to denote a kind of moral 'sickness' for those attracted to the same sex. It was, as such, a concept created to exert control over the practice of sexual relations by labelling those engaging in same-sex relations as deviant (Msibi, 2011:56). These labels would, in time, also be used to control the sexual practice of indigenous African communities. On the other hand, although words like 'homosexual,' 'gay,' 'lesbian,' and 'queer' stem from Western discourse, this does not mean that same-sex relations did not exist in Africa. African homosexuality, as Mbisi argues, is neither random nor incidental. "It is a consistent logical feature of African societies or beliefs" (Msibi, 2011:63).

There are even traces left by early bushmen “depicting how African men engaged in same sex activities” and was only erased when heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity became hegemonic (Msibi, 2011:63). This is an important point because when thinking of gender and sexuality, there is a tendency to think of women or LGBTQI+ individuals without theorising what happens to men. Before I theorise gender and sexuality as it relates to women in this chapter, I will therefore begin by addressing heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity as mechanisms and technologies of power.

3.2.1 Heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity

Heteronormativity, as the term suggests, is a framework that regulates sexual practices by assuming heterosexuality as normal. As such, it also has a norming effect on other kinds of sexual relations. Heteronormativity “is based on the belief that all persons fall into two opposing but complementary genders (i.e., man and woman)” and is reflected in and upheld by “various aspects of heterosexual privilege, including assumptions that romantic coupling consists of ‘opposite’ sex partners (Brooks Dollar, 2017:10). Besides having a totalising tendency, heteronormativity also fails to “appreciate actual lived experiences” because its “essentialist definitions of sex and gender often rely on overly simplistic descriptions that indicate a set of core features and designates them as either masculine or feminine” (10). Heteronormative discourses and practices have also led to the idea that homosexuality is unAfrican and that men have certain rights over women. Noteworthy in the case of the latter is the 2006 rape trial of the former president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, in which the defendant was accused of betraying her culture because she had undermined the dignity of an important black man. In the trial and the political mobilisation that ensued, the defendant’s rights and dignity were not only forgotten because, more importantly, as Ratele has argued, “[a] ruling masculinity is powerfully capable of organising ideas on sexuality and human rights” (2006:55). Heteronormativity is thus what gives credence to heterosexuality to make it seem normal, natural and consistent, that is, more ‘rational’ than homosexuality for example. Here we can see that just as ubuntu is normative, so too can gender and sexuality and their relations be. This is not to say that all norms are ‘bad’, but rather that they should be scrutinised as when they become mechanisms and technologies of power that have detrimental effects on the way certain lives can be lived and expressed. “In the most extreme cases, certain societies have laws expressly prohibiting forms of homosexual contact with consequent punishment, which could extend to a death penalty” (Samuel, 2018). Death by stoning or other equally gruesome methods are potential fates for homosexuality in certain countries. Thus, the perceived aberration of homosexuality (and deviation from what is seen as the norm—heterosexuality) is punished in the most extreme manner possible.

The heteronormative discourse is one that advocates for ‘normal’ relations between a man and a woman. In doing so, it promotes heterosexuality. It is a discourse that views female sexuality as vulnerable and as submissive to the male partner. Male sexuality therefore becomes one that is characterised by domination. The heteronormative view is one that advocates for only two genders that can enter into a relationship. The relationship in question has to uphold the societal norms and standards that have been acceptable over the years. These norms include these two individuals entering into a marriage contract and having children, an image that is generally accepted by society. Because this discourse strongly advocates for a relationship between a man and a woman, it may be seen as being hostile, even though it might have not been the intention to show hostility and prejudice towards gender non-conforming people and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Consequently, such people would feel somewhat prejudiced and unwelcome because of their sexual orientation and preferred identity.

While the promotion of an orthodox way of life is not an intentional act or response to any identity that does not fall under these norms and standards, one could argue that it actually provides privilege and favour to those who conform to the standards and norms of being in a heterosexual relationship. As stated above, the heteronormative discourse is one that does not intentionally exclude or marginalise individuals who do not conform to the societal norms of heterosexual relationships. However, this is not the case when it comes to homophobia; individuals who do not conform to the societal norms or relations between a man and a woman, those who choose to identify as gender non-conforming and those who gravitate towards the LGBTQI+ community are intentionally and explicitly marginalised. These individuals experience various types of abuse, including hate speech, discrimination, violent attacks and hatred and, at times, fear for their lives. The unfortunate part is the fact that the perpetrators could be their family, friends, or colleagues, or even individuals who live in their communities. These perpetrators can take it as far as initiating ‘corrective rape’ in order to get the victim who does not conform to societal norms to change their sexual orientation or identity in order to please them. Generally speaking, these homophobic perpetrators/individuals have the intention to cause harm, degrade and ridicule their victim/s while showing prejudice and hostility. homophobic individuals are aware of their actions as they are a direct response to non-heterosexual identities. This positions the marginalised individuals as outcasts who fear to be who they want to be in terms of their sexual orientation and choice of identity. These direct and intentional acts of abuse often have an impact on the victims’ rights. An extreme example would be corrective rape, though less extreme examples are also prevalent, such as when parents / a community shun or excommunicate a person.

Related to heteronormativity is *hegemonic masculinity,* which not only regulates heterosexuality but also the way heterosexual men in particular should behave, act and appear. Of course there are hegemonic femininities too, although these are addressed more implicitly and more in terms of hegemonic feminisms (i.e. Western feminisms) rather than femininity as such; however, this is beyond the scope of this project. Briefly then, some scholars, like Connell have suggested that there is no possibility of a phenomenon like *hegemonic* femininity, though recent work by gender studies scholars suggests otherwise. Carrie Paechter, for example, argues that hegemonic femininity would necessarily "have a clear relationship to hegemonic masculinity which would not simply leave it as Other" (2018:122). Studies on hegemonic femininity would also need to account for the many "ways in which hegemonic gender forms are supportive of the status quo" and, in so doing, perpetuate unequal gender regimes (122). That said, any understanding or theorisation of hegemonic femininity should avoid being totalising; that is, it should "include an understanding that not everyone is in either a hegemonic or some sort of subordinate or otherwise degraded position", but that people can – and mostly do – switch between positions depending on their context (122). Hegemonic *feminism* (also known as 'white' feminism) on the other hand, is central to this study as one of my aims is to recentre the focus of gender on African practices and understandings. As Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari argue, the promise of intersectionality was aimed at addressing this. Thus, by looking at how different intersections affect people differently, e.g., race, gender, class, ableism, and so on, it was thought that sites of power would be exposed and could then be recentred. Importantly, this would also apply to "the circulation of knowledge", yet many theorists have noted the continued "silence about racism in European gender studies" (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020:184), which would make it seem that intersectionality was not as fruitful as some had hoped it would be. To that end, I aim to shift the gender lens to Africa in this study.

As concerns hegemonic masculinity, Morrell *et al*. argue that it is an analytic "used to explain the nature, form, and dynamics of male power" (Morrell *et at.,* 2012:12), though the concept was not explicitly used among gender activists during the 1990s and only gained purchase later. In their work, Morrell *et al*. propose three major categories of masculinity, namely *white masculinity*, "represented in the political and economic dominance of the white ruling class"; *African masculinity*, which they view as "rurally based masculinity that resided in and was perpetuated through indigenous institutions" like "chiefship, communal land tenure and customary law"; and *black masculinity* which "emerged in the context of urbanization and the development of geographically separate and culturally distinct African townships" (Morrell *et al*., 2012:12). The reason they distinguish between African and black masculinities is not due only to colonisation, but also because of the fact that black men left their homes to go and

work in areas populated by many other masculinities. Historically, African men had strong links with the countryside. Back home, they had a family with livestock, and some were headmen or held other important positions. This, to a great extent, defined their sense of masculinity. However, when they left their homesteads to go and work in the city, African masculinities became reshaped into something new. “The new masculinity incorporated work as a central feature of its identity” even though the “processes which created the new African working class[es] were not confined to Africans” (Morrell, 1998:626). According to Morrell, work soon became a ticket to the city and this is where most black men wanted to see themselves. In apartheid South Africa, this was more complicated because if a black man was found not to be working, he could be imprisoned and deported by the apartheid police. The racial segregation, unequal treatment of races and the plunging economy all played a pivotal role in how young men reacted to their environment. More recently, many young adult men find themselves without work and, as a result, with nothing much to do. Lacking inspiration from their leaders, they have consequently resorted to seeking influence and inspiration elsewhere. For some this manifested as looking to Hollywood for their symbols from which they have developed a materialist and consumerist orientation (Morrell, 1998:627). For others, to be a man is to be so “according to the tsotsi culture” which means being “streetwise”, being tough, fighting (627). The emergence of the tsotsis marked the South African landscape with a fundamental change. “A new language emerged which indicated a belonging to an urban environment where ethnic ties and rural roots were less important than the fact of exploitation and alienation by racial capitalism” (1998:627). In terms of masculinity, this meant expressing ‘being a man’ by means of violence – “against other gangs, against workers, against symbols of authority and sadly”, against women and girls (1998:627). Many theorists have argued since that even these masculinities are diverse within themselves and, I would add, that these do not sufficiently account for the new elite black forms of masculinity. The concept is, furthermore, often dislocated in its descriptions of “traditionalist and othered masculinities in contexts of global capitalist marginality” which “reproduces an upside-down world” (Ratele, 2006:38). That is to say, marginal masculinities become mistaken for hegemonic masculinities.

In contrast, hegemonic masculinity also “provides a way of explaining” how “a number of masculinities coexist” even if “a particular version of masculinity holds sway, bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own” (Morrell, 1998:608). When this occurs, hegemonic masculinity becomes a power mechanism for silencing or subordinating other masculinities to the dominant and seemingly only ‘legitimate’ one, positioning these in relation to itself such that the values expressed by these other masculinities are not those that have current legitimacy. There is also a close relationship between hegemonic masculinity

and violence because even though hegemonic masculinity “generally operates without recourse” to *overt* violence, “the capacity for and threat of violence underpins it” (Morrell, 1998:609). The main point is that different masculinities express different characteristics and features which change over time and according to the space an individual may find himself in. Thus, even though these categories of masculinity may seem stable, they are constantly shifting owing to several factors. In other words, masculinity is a “collective gender identity and not a natural attribute”; it is “socially constructed and fluid”; and finally, there “is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities”, none of which are “fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships” (Morrell, 1998:607). For this reason, Connell and Messerschmidt identify four categories of masculinity according to power and status, namely dominant, complicit, submissive, and oppositional or protest (2005). The reasoning behind this is to try and make sense of the relationship between groups of men and the patterns that emerge from this. Connell has further refined the definition of hegemonic masculinity as referring to “that which constitutes a ‘real man’ or forms of ‘successful masculinity’”, notions that are themselves influenced by cultural standards or norms “for masculinity or masculine behaviour” which, over time, become “conventional and stereotypic form[s] of masculinity” (1995:24).

Colonialism, like apartheid, played a prominent role in restructuring and developing African masculinities into black masculinities because this system of power and domination imposed its own views of gender and masculinity on the populace at large, but especially on those in subjugated positions, though this was always contested territory. In addition, although it is important to remember these complex histories, Shefer *et al*. reminds us that “while acknowledging the importance of complexity and uncertainty in scholarly and activist projects with young men, it is imperative that we avoid falling into the trap of an apologist discourse for young men in relation to male violence and other problematic hegemonic male practices” (2015:107). Also, while it is tempting to blame colonialism for hegemonic masculinity, it can be found even in precolonial societies, just as homosexuality and other non-conforming masculinities existed. That being said, colonial attitudes did shape the way masculinity – and especially homosexuality – has come to be viewed. Here Zimbabwe provides an illuminating case study.

In attempting to understand homosexuality in African societies, and to prove that it existed, Epprecht conducted a study in the rural villages of Zimbabwe. In his study, he found that homosexuality or sexual relations between males date back to the precolonial era, although “colonialism introduced new settings and understandings which distorted and corrupted these practices” (Morrell, 1998:621). Even so, many different expressions “of male-to-male

sexuality" are known to have occurred even during the initial "decades of colonial rule," including "affectionate, reciprocal love affairs, prostitution, rape, blackmail attempts and sexual assault while the victim slept" (Epprecht, 1998:632). Despite evidence that homosexuality existed in Zimbabwe long before colonialism made its appearance, many Zimbabweans do not believe that homosexuality is something that exists in their country and view it rather as a foreign disease or as a behaviour that is unethical and a colonial import (1998:632). In contemporary Zimbabwe, homosexuality is shunned, leaving many homosexuals with little recourse other than to hide their true selves from their families and communities. As in other parts of the world, some even ended up marrying and having children to prove they were not homosexual. This was aided in no small way by former President Robert Mugabe whose anti-gay legacy continues to haunt Zimbabwe. Known for his outspoken views, he referred to homosexuality a "filthy, filthy disease" and declared that "the dead will rise against us" if Zimbabwe showed any tolerance for it (Maurice, 2016). The result is that the LGBTQI+ community has no recourse to legal protection.

Masculinity, like any other gender category, is a complex one, with historical questions ranging from industrialisation and capitalism to colonialism and modernity to decolonisation. "South Africa has seen a rapid increase in scholarship and programmatic interventions focusing on gender and sexuality, and more recently on boys, men and masculinities" (Shefer *et al*., 2015:97). According to Morrell, however, if we are truly "to understand questions of masculinity, it is not enough to look at subjectivities or discourses"; rather we must "develop an understanding of gender power relations, and this involves establishing the nature and form and purchase of hegemonic masculinity" (1998:612). This especially because until relatively recently men "were a taken-for-granted category" in studies of gender in South Africa (Morrell, 1998:713), with most of the gender work focused mainly on women. For Morrell, there are several reasons for studying men through the lens of masculinity, one being that "it is to move away [from] essentialism and sex-role theory which together promote analyses" that "rest on unproblematised and naturalised equations of men with particular traits or characteristics" (1998:630). The second is towards an understanding of how "gender is a feature of all social relationships" and thus part of the mechanisms of power used to create and sustain dominance (1998:630). The question remains: How are we to philosophically understand heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity in terms of value systems?

3.2.2 Gender and power

The French philosopher Michel Foucault offers a compelling framework for understanding gender and sexuality in the first three volumes of *The History of Sexuality.* His argument, in the main, is that although same-sex relations have probably existed for as long as humans,

the *category* of the homosexual "grew out of a particular context in the 1870s" and must therefore be understood as "a constructed category of knowledge rather than as a discovered identity" (Spargo, 1999:17). This was partly due to the fact that medical sciences became interested in studying particular subjects, of which homosexuals were one. New innovations, including that of psychoanalysis, merged with the medical science of the time to produce theories "degenerescence" to explain how certain maladies – "it made little difference whether these were organic, functional, or psychical" – worked together to produce "a sexual pervert" such as exhibitionists and homosexuals (Foucault, 1977:118). Foucault argues that it is precisely these knowledges of "perversion-heredity-degenerescence" that "formed the solid nucleus of the new technologies of sex" (118), where *technologies* refers not only to the various operations people made on their "own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" but also those that were made by other people or even political institutions to transform themselves to reach a "state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988:8).

As is clear from the final sentence, Foucault does not focus only on the "negative aspects of the construction of homosexuality", even though these are obvious in his work as they pertain to the "late 19th and early 20th centuries" (Spargo, 1999:20). This is because, contrary to his earlier work such as *Discipline and Punish* (1977), in which he emphasised how technologies of subjugation were applied to create "docile bodies" by "dissociating power from the body", such as is the case with economic exploitation which "separates the force and the product of labour" (138), he gives far more credence to agency and resistance in his later work. Furthermore, even though subject positions and identities are socially constructed, this does not mean that they are "any less real for the identified" (Spargo, 1999:20). The determinism found in Foucault's earlier work thus gives way to a redefinition of "power to include agency as self-regulation" which places far more emphasis on how subjects make and remake themselves continuously. So, even though normative frameworks of sexuality may compel what the gender scholar Adrienne Rich (2003) calls *compulsory heterosexuality*, Foucault would argue that other counter-strategies are also at play. This does not mean that we should dismiss Rich's work because her theorisation of compulsory heterosexuality shed light on "unexamined heterocentricity" which, according to her, functions to erase "lesbian existence" while also distorting the "experience of heterosexual women" (2003:11). What she shows, is that even something like compulsory heterosexuality has negative impacts for all genders identities, even though there are counter-impulses at play, as Foucault says. What makes such overriding identities powerful is the underlying logic according to which heterosexuality is posited implicitly and explicitly as *better*. For Rich, it is important that we become mindful and acknowledge that compulsory heterosexuality is a pervasive ideology that advocates and

enforces male domination and female subordination, which often leads to sexual and gendered inequalities. Only by recognising this can we resist.

Rich goes on to reference Kathleen Gough's text, "The Origin of the Family," which highlights and expands on the eight characteristics of male power, including how they exert control over women by, for example, exploiting them for free labour in the house, which includes house duties and child rearing (Rich, 2003:19). These kinds of "soft power" techniques can be thought of as part of the organising principles and logics of compulsory heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity and heteropatriarchy which function, on the one hand, as regulatory, governmental and norming practices "whose power is to produce, demarcate and control bodies to consolidate a heterosexual imperative" (Vilakazi & Mkhize, 2020:1). On the other hand, according to Foucault, power and freedom are co-constitutive, meaning power relations "necessarily presuppose that all parties involved in such relations have the ability, even in the most extreme cases, to choose amongst a range of structured options" (Thompson, 2003:122). Granted, in some cases this may be very minimal freedom but exercising such freedom restructures – even minimally – the conditions of possibility for future action. Here, then, we find a link between gender and ubuntu, namely that just as ubuntu is intersubjective at its core, so much so that the relational aspect of ubuntu is the most important determinant of a person's identity precisely because it is equal to participating in life itself, thereby creating the conditions of possibility for life – and for the flourishing of life – so too the relational aspect of power configurations allows for an understanding of power as something more than just a means of domination or violence. That is, power is understood as the *potential* to exercise freedom and thereby create the conditions of possibility for life, and aesthetic life, even if minimally so.

In the next section, I turn to feminine sexuality.

3.3 Women and gender in precolonial and colonial Africa

In precolonial Africa, or the period "before formal European colonization" (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2021:2), women played a prominent role in their communities. Female power was thus "not an aberration, and there were many variations in how women accessed and exercised power across societies", seen from the fact that they occupied positions such as leading armies, launching military conquests, founding new states, and governing kingdoms and established cities (Bouka, 2020:6). In some cases, and depending on the society, there were women who held the position of Queen Mother, that is, they were autonomous rulers.

An example of a woman who occupied such a position was Queen Pokou who ruled in the 18th century. Through a succession of conflicts, she led a branch of the Ashanti Empire away from Kumasi. Agbaje (2019:3) laments that women are not held in the same regard as they were historically, noting that they had a much larger range of responsibility before the colonial years, ranging from the homestead to the wider community. In other parts of Africa women co-ruled with their husbands, sons or brothers. For example, in Central Africa, in the Nyiginya Kingdom, the Queen Mother played a prominent role in politics until the early 20th century. This included holding several political positions while guiding the young king, in most instances her biological son, until he was of age. Women, in other words, played influential roles in the governance of their countries and societies, particularly in West Africa. In Asante Ghana, three women even ruled in succession as chiefs of Dwaben in the 19th century, namely Nana Ama Sewa, Afrakuma Panyin and Ama Saponmaa. These women played influential roles in leading their people to freedom during the wars they faced, as well as during the rebuilding phases of their communities thereafter (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2021:6). In Nigeria, Iyalode was another female chief who served her people. Notably, she came to power through merit and not as a result of inheritance. During her term in office there was a council of subordinate female chiefs who focused on all matters that pertained to women. Not only were the "roles and experiences of women in politics in West Africa" diverse during the precolonial period; they also ruled over societies "with complex hierarchical systems", some of which gave "women belonging to the royal family an opportunity to enjoy authoritative power through the various political offices they held" (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2021:7).

In other societies, women who were of a certain age – mostly older women – were given certain obligations, such as ritualistic ones, while also being responsible for giving advice to members of society (Bouka, 2020:6). In Zimbabwe, women also enjoyed good standing and were responsible for agricultural production, taking care of their families, pottery making, and/or being mediums, traditional healers and midwives (Agbaje, 2019:7). In short, women were active agents in society. This was the case elsewhere too.

In West Africa, for example, women, as in Zimbabwe, were not only responsible for the running of their families and communities, but also played an important role in the agricultural sphere and local markets. Additionally, they had flexibility in terms of their duties so that the social positions of women were varied, just as they "enjoyed positions of prestige and recognition" (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2019:2). In this region, women worked for several hours a day and were viewed as the economic powerhouses of their societies. In countries such as Gambia, women were held in high regard and valued in terms of their traditional familial roles (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2021:3). Women's power and prestige were evident too in

the role they played in marriage ceremonies – which not only entailed unions between men and women but also between the families of the woman and the man. Amoah-Boampong and Agyeiwaa attest that “the institution of marriage” was “seen by West African women as a means through which they could enhance their status and economic wealth” (2021:4). Family relations thus played a pivotal role in precolonial Africa, with societies being either patrilineal, bilateral or matrilineal, the last mentioned being exemplified by the Asante in Ghana. In such diverse family structures, both men and women had distinct roles in their families, but what is important to note is that “irrespective of the type of kinship system, the fundamental role of women within the household was reproduction and production” (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2021:3). What becomes clear is that women had a dominant influence in precolonial African societies and greatly influenced the social spheres of their communities, as well as public and political life. However, this changed dramatically during the colonial years.

3.3.1 The colonial years

Colonialism marks a period in which Africa as a continent was faced with invasions and diplomatic pressures. Early colonial forces arrived in Africa in the 15th century, although it was not until the late 19th century that the European nations met and discussed which countries in Africa they were going to invade. Colonisation is thus understood as “the practice of a stronger power extending its control over weaker ones”, including through the “economic exploitation of natural resources, creation of a new market for the colonizing nation and the geographical expansion of the colonizing nation’s ideas, language and way of life, especially from the 1870s through the 1900s” (Agbaje, 2019:3). Bertolt defines colonisation as the *regulation* of “all aspects of African societies: knowledge, culture, art, economy, including gender relations” (2018:5). Mamdani adds that “colonialism claimed to bring about civilization to a continent where it claimed it saw life – to borrow a phrase from a context not entirely unrelated – as nasty, brutish, and short. Civilization here meant the rule of law” (1996:109). Countries were mainly colonised by the British, with the Belgians occupying Congo, the Portuguese occupying Mozambique and Angola, and the Italians invading Libya.

One of the first things colonial rulers put in place were controls for separating and segregating people of colour from whites. Many natives were sent back to the rural areas from which they were deemed to have come from in the first place (Mamdani, 1996:86). This “shift from race to tribe was pioneered by the British and articulated as the policy of indirect rule” (Mamdani, 1996:90). In South Africa, this logic intensified when the country transitioned to apartheid. It may even be argued that apartheid was a more efficient mode of native control than even colonialism. The point is that race became the main way in which the social status, identity

and role of a person was redefined. In countries like Malawi and Zambia, as in South Africa, natives were also controlled administratively.

In order to understand Africa and its historical aspects one needs to understand the impact of colonial occupation. Colonialism came with the creation of a separate, but subordinate, state structure for Africans/natives that was developed in Southern Africa, though not in West Africa. This form of enclosure meant that people were separated based on their tribe as well as race. In Natal, South Africa, for example, there was a dual system, one for the colonisers and the other for the natives of the land (Mamdani, 1996:62). There was a clear distinction between these two systems. The coloniser system was modern while the native system was customary and the former was considered more sophisticated for this reason. This system did not, however, have an autonomous native administration, and there were no homelands under apartheid. The British colonisers also had an impact in other African countries, as did the Belgians, the Portuguese and the Italians, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. “The natives must belong to his own tribe: the notion of the native as permanently a peasant and only temporarily worker was given legal reality through a series of decrees between 1931 and 1933” (Mamdani, 1996:86). This meant that the natives were enclosed by the colonisers based on their tribes; they were not allowed to marry into other tribes or races, this being regarded as a criminal offence and witnessed most acutely in South Africa when it transitioned to apartheid – another form of enclosure that could be felt especially in terms of race and tribalism. It may even be argued that apartheid was the most efficient mode of native control that occurred between the two alternatives. “The shift from race to tribe was pioneered by the British and articulated as the policy of indirect rule” (Mamdani, 1996:90). What this meant was that race was used as the main way in which a person’s social status and role were redefined. Specifically, apartheid laws defined the colonised as a racially oppressed majority which, in order for the colonisers to exercise control, had to distance itself from any traditional practices that were present. Race, according to Mamdani, “tended to accentuate the colonial context of rule rather than to assuage it. As the cutting edge of social life, racism compounded rather than eased the problem of rule in a colonial context, for its thrust was not to divide and rule but to unite and rule” (1996:90).

There was, however, another form of enclosure enacted by the white race, which prohibited the natives from practising their customs in accordance with the way they had always done over the years. The colonisers did not allow a man from the native tribes in South Africa to marry more than one wife (i.e. to practise polygamy), which had an indirect impact on their family planning and reproduction. What this meant in fact was that while the colonial government recognised customary law, as it it did in Natal, it regarded it as a necessary evil

and not as a virtue. In Malawi and Zambia, the native people experienced the same type of administrative control as the natives in South Africa. The colonisers took control of one colony after another, resulting in the natives having to leave the land that rightfully belonged to them for a variety of reasons. Another common trend evident in these colonial invasions was the discrimination against women that prevailed. For example, the administrative system put in place by the colonisers did not favour women and effectively placed women in inferior positions.

In the new post-1948 apartheid regime, race and tribe had to be seen as complementary and not exclusive methods of native control. “Exclusive reliance on race had led to a superficial mode of control: while strictly demarcating natives from white civil society, it left the natives as the majority” (Mamdani, 1996:96). Furthermore, in order to exert more control and power as the racially defined minority, the colonisers further split the majority into compartmentalised minorities. They did the compartmentalisation by defining every native as a Bantu belonging to a particular tribe, subject to regulation under its own customary law, it could be possible to divide natives into a number of tribes each a minority of its own, “and thereby contain all within the parameters of separate tribal institutions” (Mamdani, 1996:96). A practical example of native control is the way Black people were moved to places like townships because no housing was allocated to them. In addition, there was municipal and racial segregation where black people were moved to inner-city slums. This occurred as a result of the influx of migrant workers seeking work in the urban areas. The effects of these moves were that resources were not allocated equally between white suburbanites and black people in townships. Rather, resources were allocated largely to white people (through the ‘white upliftment’ programmes, for example) resulting in a squatting epidemic. While people of colour were allowed to work in urban areas they were not allowed to reside there. The apartheid state also created rifts between the Indian, coloured and black communities, spreading discord among them.

In 1948, the National Party came into power. Black people continued to live in conditions that separated them from the economic resources. By 1990, the majority of South Africa’s black population lived in what were called Bantustans which accounted for only 14% of land in the country. It is important to note was that a large number of the people in these areas were the victims of forced removals (Mamdani, 1996:102). However, colonial rule was not only implemented as a form of control over the natives of the land through policies, laws and practices according to “which a polity” sought “to extend or retain its authority over other peoples or territories,” but also for wealth extraction and the development of infrastructure through the exploitation of cheap or forced labour (Agbaje, 2019:3).

Thus, colonisation is a concept and a practice that is associated with the domination by a nation of other territories and other peoples. “Colonization has been one of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of mankind. It leads to the exploitation, enslavement and even extermination of human populations across the planet. From the 19th to the 20th century, the peoples of Africa, America and Asia were subjected to European domination” (Bertolt, 2018:4). Colonisation can also be seen as an economic and military force which was strengthened through the subjugation of many countries in the so-called Global South, such as Africa and Latin America, and the concomitant legitimisation of Western hegemony.

There were, of course, numerous forms of resistance by African peoples during the initial periods of colonisation, although all countries with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia were eventually conquered. During this time, African women were often perceived “as helpless and powerless victims of the colonial patriarchal order” even as “the colonial library created a cult of domesticity that was evinced by gendered differences in the social, economic and political spheres that confined women to the domestic sphere” (Adesina, 2020:2). What this meant was that the control of the socioeconomic and political domains became exclusively reserved for men, with white men at the very top of the hierarchy. Even though colonialism “affected the social, political and economic landscapes in Africa”, this took place unevenly with woman having varied colonial experiences “across the regions due to diversity in culture, colonial idiosyncrasies and historical experiences” (Adesina, 2020:3). Nevertheless, it is clear that colonialism “forged a gendered division of labour as it did not take into account the importance of incorporating women into the political, and socio-economic positions in society” (2020:3). Besides narrowing the range of opportunities available to women, there was a dilution of power resulting from the subordination of African women to domesticity in the private sphere, while some men retained power by becoming interlocutors between their communities and the colonial authorities (Bouka, 2020:7). Thus, coloniality played an important part in reshaping gender boundaries and reformulating gender subordination in favour of men (Agbaje, 2019:2). This had “multiple and sometimes contradictory effects on their status and livelihoods” and contributed to women having to “struggle against both economic and psychological enslavement” (Adesina, 2020:2).

According to Adesina (2020:7), however, the colonial period was not entirely negative for women as it later afforded them new opportunities and salaried employment in the spheres of commerce and education. Blyden describes this differently, arguing that millions of African men and women became commoditised as there was a demand for free labour (2019:2). It is clear that scholars do not have similar views in this regard. Additionally, the slave trade directly affected African women who were transported across the oceans in ships where they were

exposed to disease and filth, and subjected to cruelty and sexual abuse from crew members (2019:9). To escape these conditions, some of the African women committed suicide by jumping off the ships. Despite these conditions, women held anti-colonial campaigns on the ships and often tried to resist captivity by provoking revolts on board (2019:11). According to Blyden, however, many of these stories are absent from histories of the Atlantic slave trade although they are increasingly "being unearthed through innovative methodologies and the mining of archives" (2019:11). For Bouka, the lack of documentation on especially women's lives speaks to the gendered aspect of historiography with men dominating writing about African history and literature (2020:5).

During the colonial era, the bodies of men and women became both racialised and sexualised in specific ways and for two main reasons: for the purpose of consolidating domination, as well as for the distribution of social roles (Bertolt, 2018:11). These new social hierarchies had a detrimental effect on "the systems of solidarity and complementarity that existed" in precolonial societies (Bertolt, 2018:11). Furthermore, once "colonialism was installed, rigid binaries, including those around gender perceptions were imposed" (Agbaje, 2019:7). One consequence of this "adoption of European hierarchical structures in the colonies" is that it greatly disrupted the values and traditions of existing societies (Bertolt, 2018:3). According to Bertolt, this is also one of the reasons why African patriarchy became reproduced in particular ways, which was accompanied by three important consequences: "a binarization of gender identities around the masculine and feminine, a reduction of the role of women in the private sphere and rejection of homosexuals through the institutionalization of heterosexism" (2018:3). For this reason, Bertolt goes on to argue that "contemporary African societies can't be understood outside the colonial context. This is because new African subjectivities and identities have been manufactured by western domination" (2018:3).

The reorientation of African practices was initiated first by the Portuguese – and the Roman Catholic Church – who were "the first Europeans to realise that African sexuality and gender diverged in surprising" and even "shocking ways from their own" (Murray & Roscoe, 1998:9). As Ibrahim has argued, sexuality was as complex in Africa as anywhere else, replete as it was with "homosexuality", tolerance for homosexuality and other non-conforming sexualities, but also "homophobia" (2015:268). In other words, the colonial period did not "introduce homosexuality to Africa", nor even homophobia, though it did reinforce homophobia where it already existed and introduced intolerance towards it where it didn't already exist through "systems of surveillance and regulations for suppressing it" (2015:269). For Ibrahim, this is important because even though homophobia is entrenched in many African societies, as well in its legal systems, the rhetoric that exists has often been taken from Global North

homophobic campaigns (2015:269). This is a point emphasised by Msibi, who also argues that "African societies have never historically had a 'gay' identity or a pathologized homosexual category; however, same-sex sexual attraction and expression were known to occur, but in usually hidden but sometimes even culturally accepted way" (2011:56). Colonisation thus affected not only the status of women and men in different ways, but also changed understandings of gender relations more generally through the enforcement of new cultural customs. Abosede Priscilla Ipadeola has called this not just an *othering*, but "the other of the other", by which she means that besides "suffering marginalization and the existential epistemology of the other as Africans, women also suffered because of their gender as women" (2023:9).

3.3.2 Technologies of power, decolonisation and the possibility of epistemic reparation

According to Montgomery (2017:229), it is important, when thinking about gender roles, to remember that they are "time and context specific", which implies that they are not static but constantly evolving "according to changing conditions". What also becomes clear is that 'gendering', in the colonial context, cannot be limited to the compartmentalisation of vocations or gender roles and expectations, and that many other dimensions, such as historiography, needs to be taken into consideration. "Remembering, acknowledging and incorporating women's roles in nationalist movements into African histories and political analyses require that we demystify the relationship between women and power over time" (Bouka, 2020:6). In Mozambique, Namibia and Kenya, for example, some women joined nationalist armed groups to resist colonisation and played a fundamental role behind the scenes as spies and weapon smugglers. Other women held noncombat positions such as being nurses, cooking or handling the logistics aspects of things (Bouka, 2020:11). In other words, the ways in which African women accessed and negotiated power – even as ordinary women – needs rethinking.

As with the section on masculinity, is seems that Foucault's understanding of power is useful here, especially in thinking about race, but more specifically gendered race and racialised gender, as *technologies* (techné) of power. Here, *gendered race* refers to the prevalence and reproduction of perceptions and stereotypes, as well as ensuing discrimination, related to racial and ethnic categories and understandings of masculinity and femininity. An example of this would be labelling African men as 'oversexualised'. Racialised gender, while overlapping with gendered race, refers more specifically to the simultaneous effects of race and gender on an individual or group of individuals. The effects of this are often actualised in terms of perceived job suitability and so on. The reason for considering gendered race and racialised gender as technologies is that it would allow for an understanding not only of colonial

operations as they were applied to people's bodies in order to subjugate them, but also for understanding how people reoriented these technologies in the applications of them to their "own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" for the making, unmaking and remaking of the self, whether for the purposes of survival, or something more aesthetic (Foucault, 1988:8). Wendy Chun has argued, relatedly, that considering race *as* a technology "shifts the focus from the *what* of race to the *how* of race, from *knowing* race to *doing* race"; that is, it reveals, for example, how race – and here I add racialised gender and gendered race – facilitates "comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar" (2009:2) and the hierarchies of being they implicate because, whether conceived of as biological or cultural (a social construct), the point is that race is used to organise "social relationships" by turning "the body into a signifier" (2009:9) – a site of knowledge, as Foucault would say.

In terms of bringing together ubuntu and gender, it seems to me that there is scope here for epistemic justice. Not only is this what Foucault's early work was aimed at, but also because it is an important aspect of the decolonial project. Linda Alcoff has noted, relatedly:

> Walter Mignolo's epistemological claims about subaltern knowledge owe much for their inspiration to the work of Michel Foucault. Thus it is little wonder that, in some important respects, Mignolo bears a similar relationship as Foucault to the discipline of philosophy, and to epistemology in particular. Even though the entirety of Foucault's theoretical writings concerned knowledge in the human sciences, the principal discussions in Anglo-American epistemology continue to ignore Foucault's work, an inattention considered justified on the grounds that Foucault's analyses of knowledge are taken to be a species of critical sociology, not normative epistemology (Alcoff, 2008:79).

Alcoff goes on to argue that Mignolo, like Foucault, has spent much time theorising the relationship between knowledge and power, and especially those "hegemony-seeking power-knowledges that arose in the context of European colonialism" (2008:80). As I just explained, racialised gender and gendered race were used to instantiate specific differences within society and then justify those. These identities were also linked to the 'epistemic credibility' of individuals, meaning one's gender, race, status as a slave, and so on were used to assess a person's 'epistemic competence' and these then became normalised assumptions and practices.

In apartheid South Africa, for example, Bantu education was implemented to facilitate the apartheid system's overall segregation aspirations. According to the Bantu Education Act, girls would be taught needlework and other handcrafts, as well as basic reading, writing and arithmetic, but only as much as was needed from the girls to become good domestic workers, just as boys' education was aimed at readying them for manual labour and other basic jobs

deemed suitable to their race by the government. The question is thus about how gendered race and racialised gender became *sites of knowledge* that themselves functioned as organising principles and logics whose power was to produce, demarcate and control bodies in specific ways. What complicates any decolonial project is that "while Eurocentric thought might be intricately entangled with colonial domination and oppression, it is arguably unavoidable and indispensable for theorizing the modern world" (Posholi, 2020:7 quoting Chakrabarty, 2000). In other words, we cannot get 'outside of' Western thought, though we can, and should, destabilise it as *primary* for thought. As Kwasi Wiredu has argued, conceptual or epistemic decolonisation should consist in "divesting our thought of all modes of conceptualization emanating from the colonial past *that cannot stand the test of due critical reflection*" (Wiredu, 1998: 17, emphasis added; see also Wiredu, 2002 and Wiredu, 2004).

By decolonisation in African philosophy, Wiredu means "divesting African philosophical thinking of all undue influences emanating from our colonial past in which the most important word is 'undue'" (1998:17). We therefore need to be very careful in that we must not reject everything that has to do with the colonial legacy. Conceptual or epistemic decolonisation for Wiredu refers to the fact that we need to re-think and re-evaluate the conceptual frameworks that we may know that are influenced and originated from colonialism. A critical evaluation of this process would be to think about the concepts and categories that fall within the conceptual frameworks of the colonial legacy. This means that we need to employ a process where we take it upon ourselves to think about what is still applicable or useful for people who were directly impacted and affected by colonialism. We therefore need to think about what is important for African people. In "divesting our thought", we need to intentionally engage in dialogue whereby we take a decision to remove colonial derived concepts that oppose the African thought and way of life. The aim of the evaluation is to create a culture that encapsulates the African identity. Wiredu further attests that there are reasons for adopting "a doubly critical stance towards the problems and theories of Western philosophy, particularly toward the categories of thought and these reasons are historical" (1998:17).

The evaluation is necessary because it allows us to rigorously test any idea or mode of thought that is still a direct reflection of colonialism. The prioritisation of the African framework can lead to a direct rejection of ideologies that do not promote the African experience and way of life. Wiredu further attests that "it is a colonial type of mentality that regards African philosophy as something that should be kept apart from the mainstream of philosophical thinking" (1998:20). The intellectual legacy of colonialism is therefore hindered, and a special significance is therefore placed on African philosophy in which African concepts are taken into consideration. It is in rejecting Eurocentric perspectives that we are able to confront the concept of gendered

race, racialised gender and ubuntu. The concept of decolonisation is linked to gendered race, racialised gender and ubuntu in that they intersect when it comes to the way that colonialism has had its influence in the identity of an individual and played a role in shaping societal structures and influences.

Colonisation not only came up with the concept of gender, but it also shaped gender roles and norms. This distorted the traditional way of life, as it came with a new meaning of how a man and woman should relate and interact with each other. This resulted in power struggles and new dynamics that did not exist pre-colonisation. There was now a need for men to exert more power, domination and control, while women were expected to be submissive and assume feminine roles such as running the household. This then brought into effect compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinities due to the struggle for power and imposed hierarchies. It is these colonial legacies that need to be evaluated and decolonised so that there is a nuanced understanding of gender that makes provision for African traditions that are not based on colonial frameworks.

An intersectionality is found between the concept of gender and race. This means that it is important to acknowledge that individuals will not identify or behave in the same manner because they have all experienced colonialism and its effects differently based on their race and gender. It is therefore important to consider these individual lived experiences through the process of decolonisation. It is through decolonisation that the marginalisation of both race and gender can be confronted so that we are able to go back to the traditional way of life that enables and enforces a process in which there can be a reclamation of the traditional and native identities and lived experiences of the African people. The process of decolonisation therefore gives marginalised individuals a platform on which they can express their true identity without being hindered by ideologies and practices of colonisation. These marginalised individuals include women, members of the LGBTQI+ community and gender non-conforming people. The diversity within the minority and marginalised groups is therefore taken into consideration, as systematic inequalities are challenged and dismantled. It is therefore important for us to engage in dialogue about the historical effects of colonisation on all individuals regardless of race.

I would add here that this applies not only to Eurocentric thought systems, but even to thought systems like ubuntu which has only recently been theorised in terms of gender. The reason is that, since there is no pure knowledge of ubuntu – for the reason that we are deeply embedded in Western thought systems – we cannot know whether the gender bias is from an African or a colonial legacy, though it would be fair to argue, given the work covered in this chapter, that if there were existing bias, it would have been strengthened by the colonial notions of gender.

This would change the question from simply being how can ubuntu, or gender, or any other category be decolonised, to what might the decolonial affordances of ubuntu be for gender, and especially racialised gender and gendered race? The aim would thus be to generate new, local, but also more generally, just, moral frameworks. In the final chapter of this thesis, I address this more comprehensively.

3.4 Gender in postcolonial Africa

According to Daniel Yaw Fiaveh and Eyo Mensah, there are three major historical paths for researching African sexuality: "the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras" (2023:7). This is not surprising given the history of Africa. Typically, as seen also in this chapter, gender, in the precolonial era, is characterised as each culture embracing its own "consistent system of sexual socialisation and rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood through rituals and initiations", with sexual relations and attractions typically "expressed through local fashion, dance performances, and body modification and scarification (2023:11; see also Mensah *et al*., 2018). During the colonial era, African gender is seen to have been reformed by especially early Christian missionaries with Christian and civil marriages and laws firmly established in colonised countries (Asaaju, 2020). In particular, practices like polygamy, "which was the most documented system of marriage in precolonial Africa", became vilified and prohibited (Fiaveh & Mensah, 2023:11). In the postcolonial era, gender and sexuality became political projects with a wide range of interests reflected in feminist research, activism and movements.

Prominent South African gender scholar, Desiree Lewis (2005), has argued that we can witness a turn in African feminist scholarship at the time to detailing "the everyday, the ordinary and the seemingly insignificant". This is important precisely because it focuses on sites "of localised struggles and transformations", rather than aiming to reify women, or gender more broadly, in specific ways (2005:382). This has not always been beneficial, however, as one effect of this has been the fetishisation of certain cultures and cultural practices as "self-contained, coherent and neatly bounded" (384). This is an especially important point for reflecting on ubuntu and gender because, as Lewis argues, "the fixation with an imagined African authenticity in relation to women in many ways reproduces dominant discursive constructions of Africa, constantly described in terms of everything that the west is not" (384). Of course, she is not trying to ignore the importance of decolonisation or paying attention to Africa's own cultures and the uniqueness thereof; rather, she is pointing to the idea that Western cultures are understood as being in flux, while this is denied to African cultures. Frantz Fanon, in *Toward an African Revolution*, points out that this is one of the main epistemic violences done to Africans and other colonised nations. In his words:

> The setting up of the colonial system does not of itself bring about the death of the native culture. Historic observation reveals, on the contrary, that the aim sought is rather a continued agony than a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture. This culture, once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testifies against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal (Fanon, 1967:34).

In other words, what Fanon argues is that colonial epistemic injustice does not lie only in positing Western knowledge as better than other knowledges, but in its closing off of indigenous knowledge to an open future. The reason for this is that colonial erasure creates a need for protecting local knowledges which, in some cases, tends to situate and treat cultural practices as self-contained, coherent and neatly bounded. For Lewis, what is needed instead, is inter- and cross-disciplinarity "and boundary-breaking" feminist "intellectual intervention" (2005:391). Similarly, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí has argued that the "differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament to the powers attributed to 'seeing'", by which she means that it "invites a gaze, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation" (2005:3). This differentiation is what renders gender, race and the like a site of knowledge – and these sites of knowledge, as Kathy Ferguson has contended, enable and disable the "questions we can ask about the world" because when we are "busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it" (1995:7). This prompted various responses from African feminists, as I discuss in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that this prompted the turn towards decolonisation, which remains one of the most important aspects related not only to gender, but to race, to education, and the like in postcolonial settings. Thus, the aim has been and continues to be a recentring of existing knowledge. "For example, Indian scholars have in the last few years focused on colonialism and postcolonialism to account for their own realities" (Lazreg, 2005:72). Similarly, African-American feminists have asserted their own Black feminist epistemologies "grounded in the experience of slavery" (72). Filomina Chioba Steady has pointed to some methodological issues that continue to exist, such as the belief in the "universal subordination of women" which, she argues, "forces us to settle for the highly contested notion that 'biology is destiny'", or the notion that men necessarily have more power than women when power is itself socially constructed, with many women deriving power "from their position in religious systems, in female secret societies such as the Sande of Sierra Leone and Liberia as well as through their roles as mothers, especially when the society is matrilineal and has matrifocal ideologies" (2005:318).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued, relatedly, that grouping Global South women into a single category as 'subaltern' has detrimental effects on "the representation of third world women" because it focuses on them as victims, thus "defining women primarily in terms of

their object status (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems)" (1984:338). Perhaps the most important recent development has thus been the distinction between decolonial and postcolonial thought, which is that "postcolonial theories accept the distinction between colonial and postcolonial eras", while "decolonial theories call this distinction into question in their emphasis on continuity in the structures and processes that have perpetuated the survival of colonial relations between European descendants and historically colonised and subjugated peoples" (Musingafi & Musingafi, 2024:38). What this means in practice is, first of all, that *location* matters. To decolonise gender from an African and even ubuntu perspective, is thus to shift the locus of enunciation from the non-Western "other" to an understanding of knowledge as embodied and embedded, which is to say practised from "within a social, cultural, historical and political time and place that reflects contextual features and lived experiences" (40; see also Haraway, 1991). This, too, is an important aspect I unpack in the final chapter.

3.5 Conclusion

Although most, if not all, countries have now gained their independence, many of the legacies of colonialism can still be felt. This is because colonisation brought with it its own rules and legislation that changed the lifestyles and the ways of life of African peoples. This includes the way gender was conceived of and practised. A few points can be made in this regard. As noted, in many African communities gendered roles were more fluid, with many instances in which women enjoyed similar privileges and status as men. With the advent of colonialism, gender relations became far more homogenised. What is also clear from the studies is that while the term "homosexual" is not indigenous to Africa, its practices are. To quote Mbisi again, African homosexuality is "a consistent logical feature of African societies or beliefs" (2018:63). Some of the ways in which gender is transformed into a normative moral framework is through *heteronormativity* and *hegemonic masculinity*, where the former relates to the ways in which heterosexuality is posited as normal, so that other sexualities are thought of as abnormal; and the latter referring to the ways in which patriarchy situates power for heterosexual men to be enjoyed at the expense not only of women, but also of other masculinities.

In precolonial Africa, women played a prominent role in their communities. They also accessed and expressed power in various ways, for example some women led armies while others were more involved in agricultural adventures. Additionally, they had flexibility in terms of their duties. That being said, family relations played a pivotal role in the lives of women, with African societies typically being patrilineal, bilateral, or matrilineal, the last mentioned being exemplified by the Asante in Ghana. In such diverse family structures, women were involved not only in reproduction but also in production. However, this changed dramatically during the

colonial years when the bodies of men and women became both racialised and sexualised in specific ways and for two main reasons: for the purpose of consolidating domination and for the distribution of social roles. One consequence of this was the disruption of African values and traditions. As we saw, Bertolt argues that this is one of the reasons why African patriarchy became reproduced in particular ways and why gender roles became far more established in their binary expressions.

In contradistinction, the principles of ubuntu are suggestive of a community that is welcoming, one that is governed by the principles of humanness, personhood and care, as well as the sharing of norms and values without meaning that an individual will lose their authenticity. Yet ubuntu, as discussed in the first chapter, has a strong heteropatriarchal bias which raises several questions, such as whether the betterment of the community is always better for all? And does the quest for the total fulfilment and enrichment of the community truly serve the individuals? Also, does the ubuntu community really accept those who defy what is normative? In other words, does ubuntu allow for an acceptance of the 'other' or does it serve to further other racialised genders and gendered races? It is important to think about this, because while homosexuality is advocated as unAfrican, the Igbo community of Nigeria is known for its openness to gender non-conforming people (Nwankwo, 2019). As we have seen, though, this is not only enforced at the level of community, but through religious institutions which reformed African notions and practices of gender and also condemned African practices and rituals as being demonic and satanic. This is why scholars like Bertolt have defined colonisation as the *regulation* of "all aspects of African societies: knowledge, culture, art, economy, including gender relations" (2018:5).

In terms of bringing together ubuntu and gender as this relates to the work covered in this chapter, I contended that one aspect that could be developed is epistemic justice. Philosophically, the question is thus about how gendered race and racialised gender became *sites of knowledge* that themselves functioned as organising principles and logics whose power was to produce, demarcate and control bodies in specific ways. What complicates any decolonial project, however, is that "while Eurocentric thought might be intricately entangled with colonial domination and oppression, it is arguably unavoidable and indispensable for theorizing the modern world" (Posholi, 2020:7 quoting Chakrabarty, 2000). Yet, as many scholars have argued, even if it is the case that we cannot entirely get "outside of" Western thought, we can and should destabilise it as *primary* for local epistemic practices – whether they relate to gender or any other site of knowledge.

Thus, while we cannot say for sure whether the gender bias in ubuntu emanates from an African or a colonial legacy, it is fair, as I have argued, to assume that even if there were an

existing bias, that it would have been reinforced by the colonial notions of gender. Challenging this bias from a decolonising perspective thus leads us to ask: *What might the decolonial affordances of ubuntu be for gender, and especially racialised gender and gendered race?* This is a question I take up more comprehensively in the final chapter of this thesis. Before doing so I address, in the next chapter, some of the ways in which the gendered body became a site of knowledge with reference to African and non-African histories. My reason for doing so is to show that although the problem of the body – and especially of the gendered body, and even more especially of the racialised gendered body – is complex and diverse and should thus be understood in terms of *multiple ontologies*, which also overlap in some ways. That is, I aim to think about how the body has been understood variously throughout history in order to show that the *material practices* of ontologies are often quite different from the intellectual systems in which they are outlined theoretically. This is true even of ubuntu with its ideal and practical contradictions, for example its ideal of an egalitarian community in which humanness is valued absolutely – which one could assume means humanness in the fullness of its expressions – and its material practices, which are more heteropatriarchal, and sometimes perhaps even homophobic, in their leanings.

3.5.1 Cartographic reflection of Chapter 3

In this cartographic reflection, I show how the categories “MAN” and “WOMAN” are sites of power that have been bolstered by heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity and unexamined heterocentricity. It also becomes clear that at least one of the effects of this was the erasure of women’s knowledges which, as I show throughout this project, can be reclaimed through counter-mapping strategies which includes exposing the underlying and enclosing logics of heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity and unexamined heterocentricity.

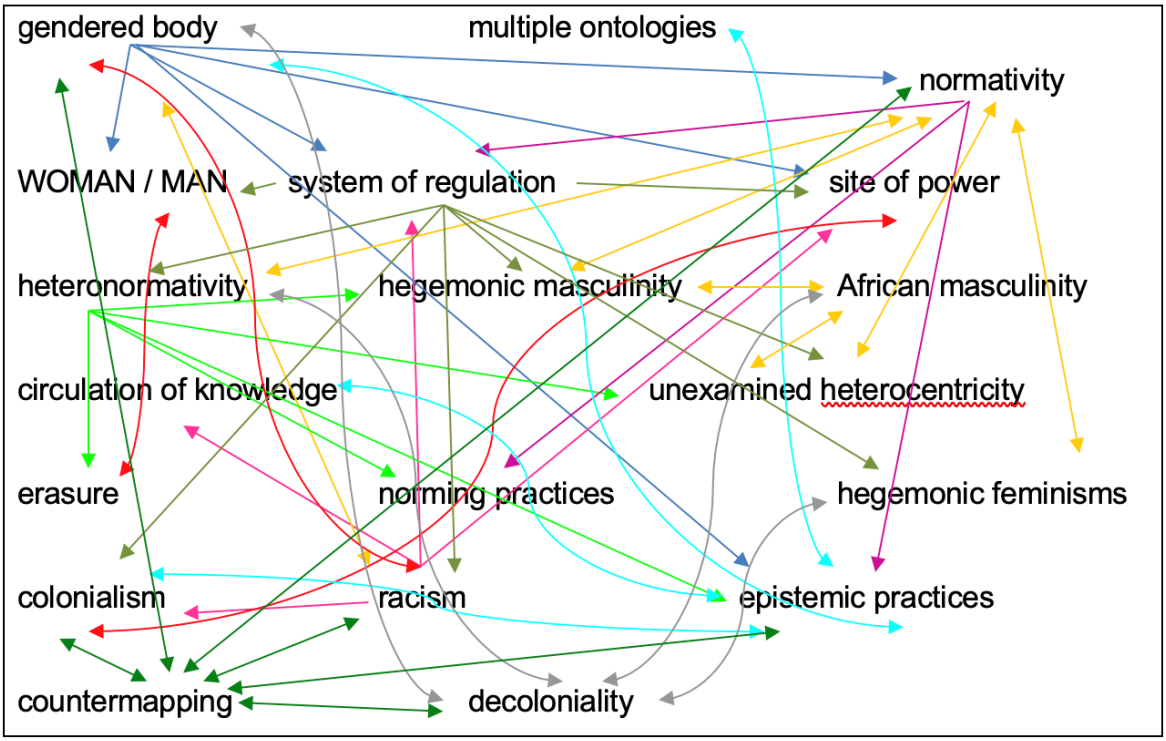

Figure 2: Cartographic reflection of Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Gendered ecologies, governmentality and the logic of enclosure

4.1 Introduction

Having provided a broad overview of theorisations on ubuntu in the first chapter, I note that while there has been some recent engagement by scholars on the relations between ubuntu and gender, there remains some issues to be addressed. These include ontological personhood, which, despite the ideals of ubuntu, seems to be in need of more rigorous theorisation in terms of gender, especially in terms of the multiple ontologies of the body, which I began to discuss in the second chapter and continue in this one. There are, as discussed in the previous chapter, numerous reasons for addressing gender more explicitly, including issues such as the widespread but erroneous idea that homosexuality is unAfrican and even ungodly. This idea, while not resulting entirely from colonialism, was certainly reinforced by it in particular ways, such as the rigid binarisation of gender identities around the categories of MAN and WOMAN, bolstered by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. The concomitant reduction of the roles of women, as Boris Bertolt argues, created a "cult of domesticity" which led to women being defined primarily in terms of their domestic roles such as childbearing, cooking, cleaning and looking after their husbands.

In this chapter, I discuss the problem of gendered race and racialised gender in more philosophical terms with reference to Cameroonian born but South African political theorist and philosopher Achille Mbembe's work on what he has called the "logic of enclosure" (2017: 35). This, very broadly, refers to the sets of practices that enclose spaces (or 'the commons'). Usually, the commons is understood as resources belonging to an entire community or society, although, as I will show in this chapter, it should also be understood in terms of the closure of the commons of the HUMAN via race, gender, and the setting of strong boundaries between the human, the non-human (e.g. animals and plants) and the more-than-human (e.g. objects, technologies, flows and processes). As the feminist scholars Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti argue, *now* "is the time for greater scholarly attentiveness to such human and more-than-human worlds", paying attention to even "mundane instances of environed embodiment" and the slow violences unfolding around us, particularly because these affect the poor, the indigenous and other disadvantaged peoples first (2018:1). Rob Nixon coined the term *slow violence* to bring attention to the

> … [v]iolence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all […] In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively (Nixon, 2013:2).

These slow violences, Nixon goes on to argue, affect especially marginalised communities, which include those affected by race, gender, ethnicity, class, economic destitution, and so on. Kenyan political activist and founder of the Green Belt Movement Wangari Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed*, powerfully brings attention to the plight of women and their deep dependence on the environment for food and water, and the inattention paid to this by governments around the world. The indigenous feminist scholar Anna Tsing *et al*. has argued, accordingly, that questions of "colonialism, violence, class, race, and gender" are not "just add-ons" to thinking about landscapes and environments, but constitutive of "patches that matter", with the history of slavery and their close ties to plantations being exemplary (2022:n.p.).

The land question is important for feminists because there is a common consensus that those most harmed by the reconfiguration of land are women. The Italian-American feminist scholar and activist, Silvia Federici, argues in line with this that as "land became more scarce and valuable, men often devised new rules to restrict women's access to it, something that the traditional [and indigenous] system has always guaranteed" (2019:118). That being said, even customary law, as Federici goes on to argue, did not always support women, sometimes leaving them vulnerable to abuse and neglect instead of protecting and supporting them. The reason for this is that customary laws sometimes prioritised men "with regards to land ownership and management, on the assumption that women would eventually marry and leave the clan" (2019:120). What this indirectly tells us is that even unmarried women were not protected by these customary laws. Another way in which women were denied land rights was through the redefinition of what constitutes kinship and, therefore, who belongs to a clan and who does not (2019:121). In apartheid South Africa, this kind of enclosure – which served to include some and exclude others – came about with the creation of the ten 'homelands' aimed at confining black citizens to certain areas, a move which in essence opened the way for mass forced removals. These homelands were Transkei, Boputhatswana, Ciskei, Venda, Gazankulu, KaNgwane, KwaNdebele, KwaZulu, Lebowa, and QwaQwa. The restriction of black people to a particular homeland was important for several reasons. First, it meant that each homeland had a particular cultural identity. This had a second effect, namely, that

besides justifying racial segregation, the homelands effectively kept different African groups from interacting with each other, thus implicitly pitting them against each other in insidious ways. Finally, the end goal was to allow these homelands to function independently, which would mean that black South Africans would not be allowed to vote – though this right had been stripped from then anyway.

This form of enclosure, which reshaped the manner in which natives viewed each other, brought about not only internal rivalry and discrimination, but also meant that previously existing rural communities lost much of their power. This exclusive "reliance on race" led to "a superficial mode of control", however, because "while strictly demarcating natives from white civil society, it left the natives as the majority" (Mamdani, 1996:96). That being said, most resources were allocated to white people through, for example, the 'white upliftment' programmes, which caused a squatting epidemic. In the main, this was because while people of colour were allowed to work in urban areas, they weren't allowed to reside there, and thus had to make do with squalid living conditions in order to be close to work. The apartheid state also created rifts between the Indian, coloured and black communities to spread discord among them. This logic of enclosure, as I will discuss in detail, also extended to gender – a phenomenon that took place not only in colonised Africa, but also in Europe. Similar to the European witch hunts, which I discuss in the upcoming sections, there were also witchcraft accusations in Southern Africa. In Mozambique, for example, widows who had a chance of benefiting from their husband's estate were accused of being witches. They were then either murdered or shunned by the community and their land taken from them (Federici, 2011:47). Similarly, in Zambia "more than one third of widows lost access to the family land when the husband died" (Federici, 2011:47).

Despite this, there are long-held analogies between women and nature, such as the idea of 'mother earth', "earth mothers, natural women, wild women, fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands, raped earths", and so on" (Alaimo, 2000:2). The new materialist feminist scholar, Stacy Alaimo (2002), notes that because of this "feminists have struggled with" these "historically tenacious entanglements", sometimes arguing vehemently against such tropes. As technologies developed, this "organicist worldview" became replaced with a more "mechanistic one" that "envisioned nature as an even less appealing figure" (2). More insidious is that these images "endorsed the exploitation of natural 'resources' by promoting an ideology of power over nature and a" deeply misogynist "methodology of 'penetration' into 'her' innermost secrets" (2).

Recent feminist scholarship, including important work by indigenous scholars, has gone a long way to argue that the dualisms between the categories MAN and WOMAN, just as those

between HUMANS and NONHUMANS, are in large part a result of the split between nature and culture, itself a consequence of Cartesian dualism and rationalism. This transformation was strengthened through other dualisms "such as culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female and mind/body, which have created a 'master rationality' or 'master story' that analytically distinguishes humans from nature" (31).

Alaimo, in reference to the work of Val Plumwood, argues that what is important about this system of dualisms is *how* they "function to construct difference", including through operations of racial and gender exclusions, homogenisation and instrumentalism (1996:n.p.), the last mentioned referring to the philosophical approach according to which activity is seen primarily in terms of its practical or instrumental purpose, which in this context would include the view of women as fit for domestic functions above all others. With domesticity, a gendered enclosure, but even more so a racially gendered enclosure, two things occurred simultaneously. First, women were cast as synonymous with nature, which really meant that they became defined "outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency" (Alaimo, 2000:2). So, idealised "beyond politics", nature simultaneously became used to bolster "gender, race, class, colonialist, and sexual ideologies" as we see most acutely with racist ideologies that created a "chain of being in which African, Mexican, and Native Americans" were seen to "dwell 'closest' to a debased nature" (19). For Alaimo, the fact "that most feminist theory distances woman from nature only underscores the importance of understanding how and why feminists inhabit nature as an undomesticated ground" (2), by which she means nature is undomesticated "both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency" (16).

In this chapter, I build on the work of the second chapter by addressing gender in terms of enclosure to address not only the issue of gender, but also the relations between gender and the environment, as well as the slow violences these entail. My aim is to provide a broad overview of how enclosure was enacted in Europe and Africa, and to show some of the common links between these, as well as the divergences that came about with the colonial conquests. I also offer broad overviews of feminist responses to women's subordination, as well as later responses that included the LGBTQI+ community more broadly. My reason for including these is, first, to draw attention to the multiple ontologies of the body – an aspect I believe ubuntu could deal with more extensively – and, second, to link these to understandings of ubuntu, gendered ecologies and African cosmologies, which I theorise extensively in the final chapter. To do so I begin by giving a broad overview of enclosure and drawing on Sylvia

Federici's seminal work on the witch hunts in Europe, as this demonstrates clearly some of the effects of the logic of enclosure and colonialism on gender.

4.2 Race, governmentality and the logic of enclosure

In his book, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning*, Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago (2015b:2) argues that "spatializing enclosures" can be understood "as a double movement of 'enclosure' and commoning", two categories that "are now part and parcel of the various mechanisms" for "understanding contemporary capitalism" (2015:2). In other words, while it is often aimed at dislocation and dispossession through enclosure, scholars have also argued that indigenous peoples and women have worked, even within these enclosures, towards the creation of new *commoning* practices; that is, practices through which human solidarity is expressed. This often begins in the family, for example in the kitchen "where production and reproduction meet, and the energies of the day between genders and between generations are negotiated", just as "the sharing of tasks, in the distribution of product, in the creation of desire, and in sustaining health are first made here" (Linebaugh, 2014:13). As Peter Linebaugh goes on to argue, commoning can also be historic, just as it can have "spiritual significance" as is expressed through "sharing a meal or a drink" (13). Importantly, commoning is "antithetical to capital" and, as such, requires that "values must be taught, and renewed, continuously" (14). The practice of commoning, I would argue, is one that is integral to ubuntu, as argued in the first chapter. In his article, "*Ubuntu* and the Problem of Belonging", Olusegun Steven Samuel confirms this view by arguing that the problem in belonging in ubuntu is not only an ontological one, but also an *ethico-ecological* one which entails a twofold focus on *locatedness* and *relationality*. As stated before, my reason for drawing attention to this is that I will argue, in the final chapter, that it is in fact an onto-eco-ethical view that is needed in thinking about belonging, community and humanness in ubuntu. I thus aim to challenge the overwhelming focus on ubuntu as a normative moral framework, by arguing that no such framework can be fully ethical in its application without an ontological and environmental dimension. These considerations are also important aspects of enclosure, as I show throughout this chapter.

Although Sevilla-Buitrago's work on enclosure highlights the double movement of enclosing and commoning, thus underscoring an affirmative aspect of it as well, the term "enclosure" is more commonly "used nebulously as a synonym for privatization, commodification, marketization or separation from non-market conditions of production and social reproduction, primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession or exclusion among others" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:2). Thus, it conflates several aspects at once: enclosure as spatial, enclosure as time-bound, the enclosure of movement, the enclosure of bodies, accompanying

surveillance practices, and so on. Sevilla-Buitrago argues accordingly that enclosure first of all "designates capitalism's mobilization of diverse configurations and significations of space to deprive people of what they create in common" (2015a:2). As such, it is an ongoing *process* rather than a once-off act, which operates according to a rationale "of erosion and seizure of the commons by spatial means in which its logic operates as a universal territorial equivalent, a spatial rationality that sustains a movement of spatial abstraction and commodification by subsuming non-capitalist social spaces under the value practices of capital" (2015a:3). This comprises the reconfiguration of many divergent but intersecting 'commons', including social, cultural and political ones, material ones such as actual space, and immaterial ones such as affective and cognitive commons. It can thus be contended that enclosure has worked, throughout history, "as a polymorphous technique" or "set of variegated regulatory procedures that are as complex and diversified as the uneven geography of dispossession they shape" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015a:3), intervening "in the spheres of production and social reproduction" (6) – the latter a concept developed by Federici in her theorisation of free gendered labour, as I show further on. What is important about Sevilla-Buitrago's theorisation of enclosure is that he thinks of it in terms of three distinct but overlapping regimes, namely, the logics of accumulation as they pertain to the *regulation of social production*; the logics of accumulation as they pertain to *the state and the market* (which is to say accumulation by and for the state and the economy); and the logics of accumulation as they pertain to their *adaptation capabilities* and, therefore, their suitability to *capitalist recuperation* (2015b:17). "Throughout history enclosures meant dispossession of certain users or the exclusion of some bodies and inclusion of others from rights of use and control" (Koot *et al.,* 2022:127). One may thus encounter physical geographical enclosures that are caused and informed by other logics of enclosures such as capitalism.

4.2.1 The logics of governmentality and enclosure

In his later work, Foucault developed the concept of *governmentality* to indicate the manner in which people conduct themselves through practices of power and the uses of technologies. Governmentality is thus a kind of power and organising logic intrinsic to that of enclosure, which shapes and guides (or conducts) people's actions, attitudes, affective experiences and so on. For Foucault, *regulatory governmentality*, as a site of 'truth' or knowledge, can "both formulate its truth" and stipulate ways for practising that truth "as rule and norm" (2008:30). Importantly, governmentality is not aimed at regulating *things in themselves*, whether that pertains to individuals, wealth or land; rather, it "deals with interests, or that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals", such as the penal system does (45). It is in this sense that the logic of enclosure

can be thought of in terms of governmentality. Where Foucault differs from theorists like Sevilla-Buitrago, Ian Shaw and Federici is that they all argue, in somewhat different but largely overlapping ways, that an enclosure is deeply linked to the capitalist economy. Shaw, for example, argues that an enclosure is "a prominent territorial feature in the longue durée of the capitalist mode of production of space" (Shaw, 2017:887) which can be further defined in terms of its concurrent "legal and symbolic" powers and the forms of "social alienation and isolation" it produced (887). It will soon become clear that Federici also links enclosure to capitalism, though she does so with a specific focus on social reproduction, thus highlighting gender roles. For Foucault, although enclosures may be linked in part to capitalism, he would argue that they cannot be understood without understanding how these territorial and social reorganisations were, rather than being "directly deducible from the crises of capitalism", the product of the "crisis of the general apparatus (*dispositif*) of governmentality" as it became "installed in the eighteenth century" (2008:70). It is precisely in this sense that Mbembe's argument of enclosure as *an underlying or motivating logic* is important.

In *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Mbembe argues that race and racialisation have, since the start of the 18th century, become a constitutive foundation of knowledge which, in Foucault's vernacular, would mean that Blackness became a site of knowledge – a *dispositif* or heterogeneous assemblage of strategies and resistances, including discourses, regulatory norms, administrative and institutional measures, and scientific, philosophical, moral and psychological statements. This reduction of bodies to race – though also to gender, as Federici adds – meant that living beings became a matter of "appearance, skin, and color", all because "skin and color" were granted legitimacy despite being a "fiction based on biology" (2017:2). Race, like gender, thus became "more or less a coded way of dividing or organising a multiplicity, of fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, of allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a *logic of enclosure*" (Mbembe, 2017:5). As discussed in the introduction, this kind of logic of enclosure was practised to the extreme under the apartheid regime and its segregation objectives. According to Mbembe, this logic of enclosure introduced and promoted a Western metaphysics that was totalitarian in its makeup. Thus, the human had to possess language and reason, the latter especially conferring on the human "a generic identity, a universal essence, from which flows a collection of rights and values" (85), except that the Black body became understood to have "no consciousness" nor "any of the characteristics of reason or beauty" and could, thus, be treated differently (85). The process of racialisation thus determined *in advance* what was possible for a body – in terms of livelihood, in terms of respect, in terms of the law, and so on. Race, as we know from history, was bolstered by pseudo-scientific endeavours like eugenics, while individuals became enclosed by 'nicknames' – the "Black" ("Nègre") as Mbembe argues (2017:47). These

strategies of governmentality were further reinforced through the “triple mechanism of capture, removal, and objectification”, so that the ‘slave’ – another ‘nickname’ – was “forcibly locked within a system that prevented him [or her] from freely making of his [or her] life” (2017:47). Because race and racialisation were aimed at dehumanisation, it is my contention that ubuntu can go a long way to addressing this, though it would have to include gender too. Thus, while Mbembe’s work is useful for understanding governmentality and the logic of enclosure in terms of race, some of the most important work done on the enclosure of women is by Sylvia Federici. Granted, much of her work focuses on the land enclosure, privatisation and witch hunting in Europe, though her theorisation, as I will show, provides a powerful framework for thinking about racialised gender and gendered race, including in Africa. In the following section, I provide an overview of her work to show the close link between capitalism, patriarchy, production and reproduction.

4.3 Land enclosure, privatisation and witch-hunting in Europe

For Federici (2004:69), enclosure is a technical term that denotes the set of strategies employed by English lords and rich farmers to eliminate communal land and expand their holdings in the 16th century. These enclosures meant that the commons were fenced off which went along with the pulling down of the shacks of poor people who were left with nowhere to go and without a means of income, but who had, until then, managed to live simply off the land because they had rights to do so.

Although “enclosure was hardly a new practice in 18th and 19th century England, it not only took on a qualitatively new scale but was increasingly marked by the violent predations of capitalist accumulation” as Alex Vasudevan and his colleagues Colin McFarlane and Alex Jeffrey note (2007:1641). They go on to draw attention to enclosure and subjectification, enclosure and legal violence, enclosure and coloniality, and enclosure and the politics of representation. In terms of subjectification, they argue that these enclosures radically reconfigured “relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality” (Ong, 2006:3, quoted in Vasudevan *et al*., 2007:1643). In other words, it instituted new modes of citizenship based on economic norms, for example the proletariat, though these were always haunted by practices of resistance – an important aspect to remember so as to allow agency and a minimum of freedom for individuals. The aspect of legal violence speaks strongly to dispossession and alienation, and includes issues as diverse as “capture, torture, and prosecution” on the one hand, and “intellectual trade and property rights” on the other, which includes “the marketisation of indigenous knowledges” (2007:1643), which ubuntu has itself not escaped, given the various advertisements and economic endeavours it has been used for. An example of this would be would be the FNB’s “change

needs you" commercial. This banking advert was released in 2022 with the aim of highlighting the interconnectedness, interrelation and humanity that exists in the various communities in South African communities. It emphasises the diversity that is found in South Africa and stresses that regardless of sexual orientation, age or gender people are interconnected and that change is possible if people work together in order to change their situations.

Legal violence, as it pertains to enclosure, also speaks to the "splintering of the urban fabric, including land, housing, and infrastructure" (Vasudevan *et al*., 2007:1643). The third aspect raised by Vasudevan and his colleagues is that of coloniality which, as was shown in the second chapter, is of particular importance to this project. This is a complex issue in that it entails thinking in "both spatial and temporal registers". For example, in terms of colonial historiography, "land tenure, debt, labour, and capital" should be understood in terms of "the production and contestation of social differentiation", which includes "tribal politics and traditional resistance to the disparate elite-subaltern formations that constituted nationalist movements" (1644). As I argued in the first chapter, it is precisely in these terms that ubuntu feminism can provide a framework by thinking of spatiality in terms of not only geography, but also as the configurations and reconfigurations of social relations across time. This includes, moreover, ways in which bodies can resist the emplacement of themselves by withdrawing from designated positions, a point developed fully in the next chapter with reference to fugitivity. The point I want to draw attention to here is that enclosure was not only a means of "dispossessing commoners of their rights of access and entitlement" (Magnani & Marchini, 2002:2), but also entailed "an ontological reconfiguration of the world" (Shaw, 2017:889).

From the beginning of capitalism, as Federici argues, "the immiseration of the working class" was enabled by "land privatization" (2004:68). The privatisation took multiple forms, such as the eviction of tenants, rent increases, and increased state taxation which often led to debt (2004:68). In England, land privatisation was successful through the "enclosures", which was a concept that was associated with the expropriation of commonly owned wealth or land (2004:69). Although land privatisation and the commercialisation of agriculture were supposed to benefit those who had been dispossessed, it did not actually increase the food supply for most people. Additionally, the enclosures made their way into the workplace of artisans. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the merchant capitalists took advantage of the cheap labour force that was available in the rural areas to break the power of the urban guilds and destroy the artisans' independence (Federici, 2004:72). At the time, that is, during the 15th and 16th centuries, Europe became engulfed in witch-hunting which peaked between 1580 and 1630. This was a period when "feudal relations were already giving way to economic and political institutions which were typical of mercantile capitalism" (Federici, 2004:166). This is why

Federici (2018:61) argues that the witch hunts cannot be understood outside of the deep crisis produced in the sphere of social reproduction triggered by “the liberalization and the globalization of African communities” and the undermining of “local economies” along with the devaluation of “women’s social position” which caused “intense conflicts between young and old women and men over the use of crucial economic resources, starting with land”.

During the witch hunts, propaganda was used to generate “a mass psychosis among the population” (Federici, 2004:168) and was spread by distributing information about witches on pamphlets and then handing these out to people, in no small way made possible by the invention of the printing press. Not surprisingly, the most affected women were poor peasant women. During the witch hunts, women were terrorised and tortured and, if found guilty, executed in public. This left women vulnerable to their exploiters and stripped them of the most important thing they owned, their right to dignity. In Federici’s words (2018:33), “witch hunting became a problem because it violated women’s rights and dignity. It made them submissive to the orthodox structures that were created by capitalism as it ensured that women became submissive to the capitalist state”. She further contends that the witch hunts implicitly served to educate those not accused about what was expected of them in society by demonstrating to them “the power of the state [and] to desist from any form of resistance to its rule” (2018:33). In her words, the witch hunts were “a war against women” and constituted a “concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power” (Federici, 2004:186). They were thus not merely the result of prejudice against women, but a more deliberate, methodical and sustained “process of social degradation that women suffered with the advent of capitalism” (164). In short, the witch hunts were a way of enclosing the female body because it extended “state control over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity” (Federici, 2018:2). Somewhat surprisingly, rather than disappearing with the abolition of slavery, it was exported to other parts of the world via the global expansion of capitalism through colonisation and Christianisation, which ensured that this kind of persecution would be spread to colonised countries as well (2018:60), as noted in the second chapter.

One of the most important consequences of the witch hunts is that it “paved the way for the confinement of women in Europe to unpaid domestic labour” by legitimising and so justifying “their subordination to men in and beyond the family” (Federici, 2018:48). Federici explains this in terms of “reproductive capacity”, which is to say, the gendered and free reproduction and care “of new generations of workers” (48). In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Federici goes as far as to contend that at the core of capitalism one finds that there is not only a “symbiotic relation between waged contractual labour and enslavement, but together with it, the dialects of accumulation and destruction of labour-

power, for which women have paid the highest cost, with their bodies, their work, their lives" (2004:17).

Another important and related aspect is the role that the plantation system played in establishing capitalism and enclosing certain bodies in a particular space for the extraction of free labour. As Federici notes, the plantation system "was important for capitalist development, not only because of the immense amount of surplus labour that was accumulated from it, but because it set a model of labour management, export-oriented production, economic integration and international division of labour that have since become paradigmatic for capitalist class relations" (2004:104). The international division of labour is important here as it speaks to the question of gendered ecologies, particularly the ways in which the state "degraded maternity to the status of forced labour, in addition to confining women to reproductive work in a way unknown in previous societies" (Federici, 2004:92). Thus, as Federici goes on to argue, "in the new organization of work every woman became a communal good, women's activities were defined as non-work, women's labour began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water that we drink" (2004:96). In this way, men became the representatives of the state within the bourgeois family, while women lost most of their power and were excluded from the labour force at large (98).

The enclosure of the commons did not pass without protest and some of the anti-enclosure struggles of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries even turned into mass uprisings, the most famous of which was the Ketts Rebellion which took place in Norfolk in 1549 (Federici, 2004:72). This did not, of course, end the expansion of capitalism, just as the end of the witch hunts at the end of the 17th century did not end the oppression of women. That being said, feminists and gender theorists have come a long way in theorising gender relations, while activism across the globe has changed what is possible for women; although, as Federici warns, no strategy will produce lasting change if it is "not accompanied by a process of revaluation of the position of women and the reproductive activities they contribute to their families and communities" (2018:57). Women contribute immensely to the societal structures that have taken precedence over the years. Some of these structures were a result of colonisation which came with gendered hierarchies and power dynamics. This, in turn, influenced and changed the role that women have played in their homes, families and society at large. With the evaluation of the concept of ubuntu, through decolonisation it is important to emphasise the importance of redress when it comes to the lived experiences of the marginalised. In this instance it would be the women who had to be submissive with their bodies to men. In the following section, I outline, in very broad strokes, some of the work

undertaken by feminists and gender scholars in order to provide a map of some of the important issues of the past and the present.

4.4 Feminism, gender and the witch hunts in relation to the global economy

One of the most devastating effects of the witch hunts was, according to Federici, that as a "powerful means to destroy communal relations" (2018:88) it instilled a sense of fear and mistrust between women, in part because they were forced to turn on each other in order to protect themselves (2018:88). To provide a lens through which to better understand the effects of the witch hunts in the contemporary world, Federici turns to Marxism which played an important role in the "second wave" of the feminist movement "to develop an understanding of how gender is connected to social economic and cultural status and power in society" (Richardson & Robinson, 2015:10). That is, gender was understood and theorised in terms of a social division of labour. Prior to the second wave, in "the early nineteenth century, a conservative ideological framework had accompanied the rise of Western bourgeoisie society, industrialization, and rapid urbanization" (McGuirk, 2019:476). First-wave feminist arose in response to this, focusing in the main on issues of universal suffrage and equality. At this stage, no clear distinction was made between sex and gender. Second-wave feminism, which emerged in the postwar 1960s and continued into the 1970s, turned to issues of "other 'oppressed' groups such as Blacks and homosexuals", later also including the voices of "women of color and third-world women" (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006:1). These new tensions and foci, which developed in the 1980s and continued into the early 1990s, were sparked by women of colour and Global South theorists and activists themselves, because they noted how the suffragists' efforts were limited to the rights of white, mostly educated women. This was especially true in the US, where "black women, disillusioned by the sexism of the 1960s Black Movement, were active in the formation of the first radical feminist groups" (Thornham, 2004:27). Meanwhile, in Britain, the feminist movement was marked by a much stronger "Marxist-socialist inflection" (27), with feminists arguing for the importance of the "emergence of a movement of working-class women" whose experience was influenced by both "production and reproduction", and thus "class exploitation and sex oppression" (33).

Some strands can be detected during this time, one of which was *radical feminism* which highlighted the importance of personal feelings and relationships. Radical feminism thus attempted to redefine the order of society by dismantling male supremacy in both social and economic contexts (Saeed & Leghari, 2019:47). Another important strand during this time was *liberal feminism* which, as the name suggests, was founded on political liberalism (Enyew & Alemeneh, 2018:59). Sparked by Betty Frieden's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), liberal feminists began to argue that although they seemingly had the same rights as their male

counterparts, in reality their opportunities were blocked in various ways, for example through what is known as the ‘glass ceiling’. At its core it was thus centred around notions of autonomy, universal rights and equal citizenship (Enyew & Alemeneh, 2018:60).

Perhaps the most important strand to emerge during this time was that of Marxist feminism. “Marxist feminists argue that the system of capitalism structured gender inequality. From this perspective economic class relations lay at the root of subordination of women” (Richardson & Robinson, 2015:24). This is where Federici’s work can be positioned, as she places great emphasis on gender in the context of production and reproduction. Marxist feminism thus emphasises patriarchy and capitalism as key to the oppression of women. In later work, however, she also notes other forms of destruction brought about by globalisation and its consequences for women, including “environmental contamination, the privatization of water” and the “clear-cutting and exporting of entire forests,” driven by a logic not wholly unlike the plantation logic of the colonial regimes “where workers were consumed producing for the global market and hardly reproduced” or enjoyed the fruits of their labours (2012:88).

At the time of writing, many of these effects have been measured statistically, showing an increased mortality rate and reduced life expectancy for African children (under five) in particular; “the breakdown of families and communities, leading children to live in the street or working like slaves”; an increase in women refugees, “displaced by war or economic policies”; and the expansion of mega-townships and -shantytowns, often accompanied by increased violence against women” (88). Thus, she argues that far from being a thing of the past, plantation-type economies are found in various places and take various forms in the contemporary neoliberalist world. Federici makes an important link here to feminist ecologies and the forms of resistance women have initiated, mentioning the Chikpo movement in Garhwal at the foot of the Himalayas, where women embraced trees marked for cutting to stop loggers from clearing the woods, as well as the Green Belt Movement initiated by Wangari Maathai and aimed at planting a belt of trees around major African cities to “prevent deforestation, soil loss, desertification, and fuel-wood scarcity” (Federici, 2012:136). Despite this, because her analysis remains within a Marxist framework, it overdetermines the role of structures of production and reproduction in a ‘universal womanhood’ without taking into consideration historical, material and other specificities.

These are also some of the reasons for the inauguration of the third wave of feminism which emerged around the mid-1990s in the wake of the new postcolonial world order in its entanglements with global politics and neoliberal economics. During this period, we see stronger theorisations of the difference between sex and gender, even though the sex/gender binary was important in early feminist work to advocate for social change. However, as the

global situation of women changed – although in different ways depending on race, geography and so on – scholars began to question the usefulness of the distinction between sex and gender, with the former denoting physical differences and the latter referring more to social constructions, though even this strong dichotomy has since been critiqued. At the time, however, gender was understood as "a hierarchy that exists in society, wherein one group of people (men) have power and privilege over another group of people (women)" (Richardson & Robinson, 2015:3).

One of the theories that came to prominence at the time was Judith Butler's argument that gender should be understood in terms of *performativity*, not to be confused with *performance*, elaborated in *Gender Trouble* (2016) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). According to Butler, performativity "describes a set of processes that produce ontological effects" even though they are not ontological per se, and in so doing "work to bring into being certain kinds of realities that lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences" (2020:147). In saying that gender is performative, she is thus arguing that gender roles are often "preempted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other" so that the "reproduction of gender" is "always a negotiation of power" (2016:i). The body is thus brought into a "complex convergence" with social norms and its effects on the "somatic psyche" in terms of the way desire is structured, because rather than simply negotiating one's own desire, it becomes part and parcel of a "complicated interplay of obligation" (Butler, 2016:xi). This, I would argue, echoes some of Foucault's work on governmentality. It is worth pointing out here that both Butler and Foucault are considered foundational to queer theory which emerged in the 1990s as a set of theories and practices that celebrated "transgression in the form of visible difference from norms" (Stewart, 2017:62). So, by exposing norms and their norming effects, queer theorists showed that these norms are neither "natures" nor "inevitabilities" but historical and social configurations (62).

Although Foucault did not intersect feminism with his work on governmentality, Catriona Ida Macleod and Kevin Durrheim have argued that this meeting may be fruitful because it would help to emphasise that gendering "occurs at multiple, interwoven levels" (2002:45). Governmentality, while totalising on the one hand in that it "concerns itself with the constitution of individualised subjectivity" through practices such as performativity, is, on the other hand, also individualising precisely because the individual "is implicated in large-scale normalising structures and regulatory controls" (45). Governmental analysis would thus enable an understanding of both the "micro-effects of power (e.g. self-technologies)" and the macro strategies thereof without "privileging one or the other" (45).

As we saw earlier, the family can provide strategies for commoning, and thus resistance, though it can also be "an element internal to population" and thus "a fundamental instrument

in its government" (Foucault, 1991:99). In 'developing' countries, like South Africa, this can manifest as concerns about childbearing, especially teenage pregnancy, which is often portrayed "as a matter of national concern" because such "early reproduction threatens economised security by contributing to demographic disaster" or welfare dependence (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002:46), an issue in more 'developed' countries. As a fundamental instrument of governmentality, the family is thus structured to operate as a regulatory mechanism for reproduction and sexuality, and gender more generally, by, for example, constructing "dominant discourses of the family" that are sometimes used to create a specific view of normal and normalised familial and gendered relations by pitting these against pathologising ones, like age-specific pregnancy (46). Of course, mechanisms of power work in far more sophisticated and nuanced ways, forming part of a "complex and irreducible ensemble of the rationality and techniques of sovereignty, security, discipline and government" (46). This raises an important question for me about the role of the community and family in ubuntu, especially given that it has been argued for in normative moral terms. My question, in other words, is about whether the community and the family also form part of the regulative or governmental mechanisms of power at play in ubuntu, and whether this may be why ubuntu scholars have, for the most part, failed to address gender in its ontological determinations.

4.4.1 Recent developments

More recently, gender and feminist scholarship has extended its scope to include the LGBTQI+ community more fully. In many ways, it has advocated for a world without gender determinations; that is, it has focused on de-gendering society (Richardson & Robinson, 2015:13). The aim, then, is to have equality without any gender categorisation entering into the debate at all. This has enabled new conceptualisations of gender, free from previous expectations around roles and obligations, and has been important especially for intersex and transgender persons. Better understandings of intersex people have also led to a broader conceptualisation of non-binary and genderqueer people who, while not all being intersex, consider themselves to "have a fluid gender" (Richards *et al*., 2017:5).

The emergence of Transgender Studies has been another pivotal point in feminist and gender scholarship and has produced a plethora of work exploring "transgender embodiment and histories as complex and resistant to overly simplistic ways of knowing about trans lives", including the tendency to strongly binarise trans persons as male or female (Stewart, 2017:63). Here, notions such as *gender ambiguity* became important for recognising "the broad range of peoples who identified their gender as different to that which they were assigned at birth" (63). This has, however, not been met with equal enthusiasm by all feminists. Nigerian-born feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a case in point here. In

particular, she came under fire for saying that trans women are not real women, a sentiment echoed by the author of the popular Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling. Adichie later clarified her statements by saying that “trans women have experienced the privileges of living as a male before transitioning” (Kean, 2017:n.p.), although Rowling has made no apologies for her views to date. This kind of stance has been referred to as TERFism, short for trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Foucault’s work on governmentality is useful here too, as Tam Sanger (2008) has argued. Just as TERFism has caused rifts, so too has trans terminology. According to Sanger, another “major site of dispute is the naming of transpeople as either ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender’”, while others opt for ‘transpeople’ “to describe those individuals whose gender identity does not match that assigned at birth” (2008:42). Sanger goes on to argue that using Foucault’s concept of governmentality provides a framework and set of related concepts for thinking about how identities, forms of government and authority, and other related intersectional issues work together to create a sense of ‘naturalness’ about them (2008:42). In other words, governmentality, as a framework, removes “the ‘taken-for-granted’ character of how things are done”, such as “norms of gender, which undergird society, and, therefore, our everyday lives”, and help create avenues for resistance (2008:42).

Relatedly, prominent transgender studies scholar, Susan Stryker, has argued that the ‘woman question’ is in need of queering. Queer theory marks another important ‘turn’ in gender studies and is linked to the work of Butler, Foucault, who is seen to be a proto-queer theorist, indigenous scholar Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (Chicana feminism and queer theory), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Adrienne Rich, Lauren Berlant and Jack Halberstam. Queer theory questions the stability of binary gender categories by interrogating the “structures and institutions within development and society” that “work to normalise, naturalise, support and privilege heterosexuality above other forms of sexuality” (Browne, 2019:n.p.) through heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, as discussed in the previous chapter. The verb ‘to queer’ thus denotes the act of challenging, problematising, disrupting, destabilising or subverting normative ideas about sex, gender and sexuality. This is also why I have chosen to use the term ‘gender question’ in place of the ‘woman question’ in this study.

With this in mind, Stryker argues that if ‘transgender phenomena’ can be broadly understood as “anything that disrupts or denaturalises normative gender, and which calls our attention to the processes through which normativity is produced” to become invisible or naturalised, then ‘transgender’ “becomes an incredibly useful analytical concept” for thinking about “a feminism that focuses on marginalised gender expressions as well as normative ones” (2007:60). We see this, first, in terms of rethinking the biological body, “which is typically assumed to be a single organically unified natural object characterised by one and only one of two available

sex statuses, [and which] is demonstrably no such thing" (62). What trans studies highlight is the cost at which the binary sexed body is produced and upheld as 'normal' when in fact bodies – *plural* – are part of a "complex amalgamation of gland secretions and reproductive organs, chromosomes and genes, morphological characteristics and physiognomic features" (62). Transgender feminism thus provides a new axis, "along with critical race studies or disability studies, to learn more about the ways in which bodily difference becomes the basis for socially constructed hierarchies, and helps us see in new ways how we are all inextricably situated, through the inescapable necessity of our own bodies, in terms of race, sex, gender or ability" (62). This is related to ubuntu because the trans-, inter-, and degendering of bodies suggests that the category of human personhood be rethought and destabilised by asking questions not only about the sex/gender distinction, but more importantly about the sex/gender *system* as a system of governmentality.

Importantly for this chapter are some of the recent developments in work on gender and ecologies, especially in terms of the emphases on intersectionality and decolonisation. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), describes how different oppressions, discriminations and dynamics of power overlap and intersect to such an extent that they cannot be reduced to a single category. For example, black women have to contend with patriarchy and racism while white women do not feel the structural inequalities of racism. Some work worth mentioning in terms of gendered ecologies is that of new materialist and posthumanist feminists.

Worth noting is the work of Rosi Braidotti who has argued that the new ecological posthumanisms raise important "issues of power and entitlement in the age of globalization and calls for self-reflexivity on the part of the subjects who occupy the former humanist centre, but also those who dwell in one of the many scattered centres of power of advanced postmodernity" (2013:49). For her, the critical posthuman subject exists "within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable" (49). What this means in practice is that posthuman subjectivity understands itself and other individuals as embodied and embedded, which implies that posthuman subjectivity always expresses a "partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality" and "community building" (49). Like ubuntu, critical posthumanism rejects individualism while promoting "an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of" the Enlightenment human, instead focusing on creating an "enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (49).

Others, like Alaimo, already mentioned in this chapter, have argued more extensively for reimaginings of the relations between bodies and environments by thinking, for example, of "how toxins circulate through" them (2018:106); that is, by drawing attention to the ecologies not only of the human, but of the inhuman and nonhuman in their intersections. The aim of such cartographies is to show that infrastructures, landscapes or even communities are not only objects of observation, but also aspects of inhabited (embedded and embodied) life. More importantly, as Simone Bignall, Steve Hemming and Daryle Rigney have argued, these philosophical lenses have brought to light the intersections between capitalism, colonial histories, indigeneity, "ecological health and long-term sustainability" (2016:416). With reference to the indigenous Ngarrindjeri and their "statement of authority in a *Yannarumi* (Speaking as Country) Deed," they argue that the *Yannarumi* "conveys a Ngarrindjeri philosophy in which being is expressed (or 'spoken') through processes of ecological connectivity" (469); that is, in terms of an "ontology of Being as 'more-than-human'" (470). In practice, this means that the Ngarrindjeri understand their own being as "inseparable from the lands and waters that define their existence", so that their experience of the "wellness or ill-health of the environment" is taken to be an aspect of their "cultural health as an Indigenous Nation" (469). The point is that their ontology has an "ecological character" that goes along with the creation of "axiological concepts for the evaluation of activities affecting the health of Country and its interconnected life forms" (470).

Nombulelo Tholithemba Shange has argued that the ubuntu ontology of humanness also implies an ecological connection because the self is "believed to be inextricably tied to God, ecology, culture, ancestors, and various elements of the social and spiritual world" (2024:2). Rethinking the colonial plantation from this perspective allows for new ways of understanding how practices of commoning may have gone hand in hand with even the worst conditions of slavery. To put it differently, an onto-ecological understanding of ubuntu makes possible new theorisations of how power and freedom are co-constitutive even on plantations, thus recasting power not only as that which constrains subjectivity, but also as that which contains the *potential* to create new conditions of possibility for life. Leonard Chuwa argues relatedly that nature, as part of the "matrix within which existence is made possible" implies an inter- and "trans-societal code of ethics among indigenous peoples" and the earth (2014:2). As an example, he references the Chagga people Uru (modern Tanzania) who live according to the moral statement *oruka lu n'maseiyano*, which means "to treasure the planet earth by being good stewards for it because as we enjoy it now, it has been enjoyed by many others who kept it well for us; we [therefore] have a moral obligation to keep it well for future generations" (2). He goes on to say that while this indigenous code of ethics was "shared by all Sub-Saharan peoples", it was never formalised because "it was regarded as conventional wisdom,

which was orally communicated through generations for the good of the entire human race and the planet" (2). As I will argue in the final chapter, this onto-eco-ethical view holds the key for theorising a more gender-inclusive ubuntu. Before doing so, however, I outline seminal works and major arguments in African feminism.

4.5 African feminisms

Feminism, gender studies and queer theory were birthed by movements originating in Western Europe and the US, as I showed in the previous section. This resulted in Western feminism becoming a significant lens for structuring gender discourse. As Oyeronke Oyěwùmí puts it, feminist scholars "are the most important gender-focused constituency and the source of much knowledge about women and gender hierarchies" (2005:49). Although these theorisations have provided many insightful lessons for thinking about issues of sex, gender and sexuality, many African scholars have argued that these do not sufficiently address African and Global South issues. In her paper "Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology", Obioma Nnaemeka examines the structures of power in the feminist movement. She contends that there is a distortion of African women's characteristics in the classroom as they are often seen as being one-dimensional – victims, or poor, or disenfranchised – which reinforces strong and simplistic binaries between "white women and other women", as well as "subject and object, margin and periphery" (2005:49). Nnaemeka goes on to argue that "the theorizing of feminism created structures of power in the feminist movement analogous to those for which patriarchy is attacked" (2005:52). For Nnaemeka, these challenges should not however deter us from furthering the project of feminism. Rather, it should challenge us to continually "scrutinize the theoretical and epistemological" assumptions of feminist scholarship, as well as its "methodological procedures", particularly in its positioning of marginalised and African women (52). One of the flaws of Western feminist scholarship is that it does not take into consideration the embodied and embedded histories of African women which distorts information shared about them. For this reason, she urges scholars to interrogate "the politics of publishing" (Nnaemeka, 2005:54) so as to avoid poor depictions and distortions. Related to this is the tendency in Western feminisms reduce women with reference to either their religion, their race or ethnicity, their nationality, and so on, thus creating uneasy relations with and between minority women through classifications like 'African', 'Chinese', 'Indian', etc. It is important however to make a distinction between white feminism and western feminism. "White feminism privileges women of one dominant culture situating them as the new norm that every other woman must navigate. Whiteness in this instance drives the bias in identifying the cultures that feminism might need to accommodate by imposing stereotypes on those cultures to incorrectly assume that certain patriarchal norms

are unchanging, and in so doing has the potential of stripping the agency of minority women who had been fighting against the norms from within" (Ijaz, 2021:259). Western feminism, on the other hand, can be defined as a movement for the emancipation of women while advocating for gender equal rights and placing an emphasis on the political, social and economic equality for women. Western feminism can and does also included strands of decolonial feminism.

According to Lazreg, the problem with such classifications is that it risks reproducing "social categorizations and prejudices that are prevalent in the larger society" (2005:68). Nnaemeka contends that addressing these issues necessitates a reconceptualisation of the notion of sisterhood to ensure that women treat each other with respect despite their differences. In other words, she argues that true sisterhood should be understood as a political act and as a commonality that is rooted in knowledge (2005:63). It may even be argued that her understanding of sisterhood entails the production of new forms of commoning.

Another important African feminist theorist is Ifi Amadiume who provides a historical account of matriarchal structures and influences that existed prior to colonisation, especially in ancient Egypt between the third and fourth dynasties. "There was plenty of evidence of ancient or indigenous feminine forms showing designation of uterine descent through daughters," she writes (Amadiume, 2005:87). In other words, matriarchal structures of kinship and power existed in many African cultures but has failed to be recognised in Eurocentric scholarship which views all women through the lens of patriarchy. To refocus scholarship, Amadiume considers evidence of matriarchal kinship in several ethnographic texts, citing the Nnobi in the Igbo rural village of contemporary Nigeria as exemplary matriarchy. "In the all-encompassing matriarchy, all Nnobi were bound as children of a common mother, the goddess Idemili, the deity worshipped by all Nnobi. The matriarchal ideology provided the logic of overall administration" (Amadiume, 2005:94). Significantly, the Igbo consisted of a women's council in which Ekwe, or titled women, played pivotal roles in the management of the society. What this political matriarchal system teaches us is that women were highly regarded and had the same rights and status as men, rather than being discriminated against because of their gender.

Similarly, Oyeronke Oyěwùmí's study on the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria brings to light misconceptions about sex (anatomical sex rather than gender). As Azille Coetzee argues (2017:24), "Oyěwùmí understands gender in the Western colonial/modern gender system to be a static hierarchical dichotomy in terms of which the feminine is the passive, material, private, inferior and opposite to the active, rational, public masculine". In relation to this, Oyěwùmí argues that "the usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *Obirin* and *Mkurin* as a

female/woman and male/man, respectively, is a mistranslation", an error which occurred because scholars failed to recognise that in Yoruba practice and thought, "these categories are neither binary opposed nor hierarchal" (2005:101). Desiree Manicom confirms this by saying that "in questioning the underlying assumptions of gender as a social category, Oyěwùmí challenges key ideas in Western feminist writing: the universality and timelessness of gender categories present in every society at all times, gender as a fundamental organising principle in all societies, women as an essential, universal category characterised by the social uniformity of its members and the fact that the subordination of women is universal" (2001:134). In her book. *The Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí argues that relations were organised socially rather than in strictly gendered terms. This allowed for reproductive roles to be acknowledged without using them to create a social ranking (2005:103). "The absence of gender-differentiated categories in Yoruba language is what underscores the absence of gender conceptions" (2005:108). She goes on to contend that gender was only created in the Yorùbá society when it became colonised and English became dominant, which led to many mistranslations, as noted above. In other words, the combination of colonial rule and the dominant positioning of English worked together to reproduce Western epistemological structures, especially in terms of the positioning of the body. She writes:

> Consequently, since the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always *in* view and *on* view. As such, it invites a *gaze,* a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation — the most historically constant being the gendered gaze. There is a sense in which phrases such as "the social body" or "the body politic" are not just metaphors but can be read literally. It is not surprising, then, that when the body politic needed to be purified in Nazi Germany, certain kinds of bodies had to be eliminated (Oyěwùmí, 1997:2).

It is also for this reason, as Coetzee goes on to note, that "Oyěwùmí makes it clear that her book is" decidedly "not about the 'woman question' because the 'woman question' is an imported issue (and a specifically Western concept) that is not indigenous to the Yorùbá people" (Oyěwùmí, 1997:ix, quoted in Coetzee, 2017:27). Oyěwùmí's intervention is thus epistemological or at the level of knowledge production. In her words:

> Different modes of apprehending knowledge yield dissimilar emphases on types and the nature of evidence for making knowledge claims. Indeed, this also has implications for the organization of social structure, particularly the social hierarchy that undergirds who knows and who does not (Oyěwùmí, 1997:30).

Finally, it is worth noting that Oyěwùmí prefers to think of 'worldsense' rather than 'worldview' because for her the latter is Eurocentric. This allows her to argue, for example, that while gender, by definition, denotes the binary opposite categories of MAN and WOMAN in the Western worldview, motherhood, "in the Yoruba worldsense is a singular category that is

unparalleled by any other" and of which fatherhood "is not its counterpart" (Oyěwùmí, 2011:225). Relatedly, Wairimũ Ngarũiya Njambi and William O'Brien (2005:157) also highlight the use of the term 'female husband' which is a custom in some African societies. The term itself is used to describe women who initiate woman–woman marriages. It thus also denotes a woman "who pays bride wealth for, and thus marries (but does not have sexual intercourse with) another woman, and by doing so, becomes the social and legal father of her wife's children" (2005:157). Njambi and O'Brien argue that in Oyěwùmí's study of the Yoruba, the terms are not gender specific since both males and females are able to be husbands and wives. One of the most important findings that Oyěwùmí made was the fact that in many African societies, masculinity and femininity are not clearly defined categories as they were in the Global North. If we thus automatically presume that a husband refers to a male and a wife to a female, we implicitly impose the Western dichotomous notion of gender on these roles. That is, "gender cannot be used as the fault-line in the reconstruction" of the African past and historians need to take care when invoking gender in accounts of African history as it could lead to "genderization" in the "process of history-making" (Njambi & O'Brien, 2005:187).

In her groundbreaking book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (2005), Amadiume provides more historical evidence of how African gender was conceived differently so that, in the Nnobi and Igbo societies, gender was separate from biological sex which meant that daughters could become 'male daughters', a phenomenon which "arose as a result of the coexistence of principles of individual and collective ownership of land" (32). It was therefore neither unusual nor irregular for Igbo daughters, for example, to become 'sons' – or then male daughters – in the sense that they took the lineage position of a son in order to have the power to control property, Neither was it uncommon for women to occupy the role of a husband – a female husband in this case – so that a widowed women could be married for economic and social reasons, even though these married women (supposedly) did not have intercourse. "The history of this Igbo institution, and other similar African histories" such as that of the Yoruba thus "powerfully destabilize the ideology of biologically determined gender identity and marriage" (Hoppe, 2016:499). Although many scholars, including African scholars, have critiqued Amadiume's book for being polemical at times, especially about western scholars, and thus detracting from the book's argument, it remains the case that "Africanists working on different regions of the continent also only acknowledge her curious Igbo case of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands'" though often themselves showing any serious work done on this phenomenon (Semley, 2017:118). Nevertheless, it remains an important study, like Oyěwùmí's – which has also received criticism – for showing that patriarchy was neither the only nor the main form of socio-political organisation in Africa before colonialisation.

4.5.1 Motherism and womanism

Another important development in African feminism is that of *motherism* – the "reversal in the treatment of the theme of black motherhood, which led to the recuperation of black histories and folk heritage through matrilineal lines" (Penier, 2019:94). For Ashaolu (2021:2) motherism refers to more than just childbearing in that it also references the important roles played by women in the traditional peaceful management of the environment and indigenous knowledge. Ashaolu's linking of motherism to the environment is important for the argument I am moving towards in the next chapter, namely that an onto-eco-ethical view is imperative for theorising a more gender-inclusive ubuntu. Arguments like the ones put forward by Ashaolu, Shanga and Chuwe go a long way towards justifying this. However, while Ashaolu argues that "the extreme care of the earth is ingrained in the commitment that a Motherist must Mother Earth" (Ashaolu, 2021:2), I will contend that these kinds of metaphors, as shown earlier in this chapter, can be harmful rather than helpful and that Alaimo's notion of 'undomesticated' nature may be more useful here. That notwithstanding, motherism is emblematic of African understandings of the 'consciousness' of the earth and other African and indigenous views in which the nature/culture divide is seen rather as a continuum. This is also the intersection that has proven to be fruitful in terms of decolonisation. This can even be seen in Ashaolu's statement that "motherism fights against every form of violence and abuse of nature, prioritizing the spiritual, material, and cultural survival of Mother Earth as an entity. It calls for love, patience, tolerance, cooperation, and non-violence between all people" (2021:3).

The most sustained work on motherism was undertaken by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu in her book *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) where she too brings together the notions of mothering, nature and nurture. In Africa, the notion of motherism is seen "as an African alternative to feminism focused on the centrality of motherhood in the African female experience" (Ebunoluwa, 2009:231). One possible problem with motherism and its focus on mothers as nurturers is that it may sideline women who can't or don't want to have children by implicitly rendering them non-nurturing. It also reinforces the dichotomous idea of women as nurturing and men as providers, which not only strengthens heteronormativity, but also hegemonic masculinity. Thus, while I argue in the final chapter that motherism plays an important role in connecting the ontology of women to ecology, I supplement this with work by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work on indigenous Amerindian culture to move the focus from women to an inclusive human, in which even animals can be human.

Alice Walker is a prominent figure in the African American scholarship on mothering and womanism. Her work is based on the belief that motherhood has long been the pillar of

communal life and is thus crucial for the physical and cultural survival of the black community in the US. According to Patricia Collins, “black feminist thought challenged both white feminist and male black nationalist perspectives on black motherhood and promoted African-derived scholarship on mothering” (2019:98) by showing that it is an important form of specialised knowledge. As Collins goes on to note, in African communities, motherhood is never seen in isolation, meaning it is not a privatised or devalued form of labour that confers on women a secondary status as we have seen has been the case in much of Europe and the US through Federici’s work. “African and African American motherhood is therefore neither inherently oppressive nor diminutive of women’s position” and “can serve as a site where Black women express” themselves freely while learning more about “the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment” (Collins, 2019:98).

One of the most important works on motherism is by Nigerian scholar Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, who developed the theory because she felt that feminism had failed in its global ambition to address the needs of women worldwide, in large part due to its tendency to address the concerns of educated middle-class white women – though this has been addressed even in Western scholarship, as shown in the work of Braidotti and Alaimo. At the time of writing, however, this was still true, leading African scholars to develop theories of motherism and womanism. The concept of motherism in African societies is, as already argued, not only about mothers in the ordinary sense of the word, but also refers to women who can commune, encircle, challenge and correct their mistakes and wrongs. They are thus pivotal for human solidarity in the nurturing of whole daughters. In evaluating the stories of black women, Alease Ferguson and Toni King conclude that “our own mothers” join this “long line of wise women folk, cultural heroes, way showers, beacons, pillars and legends. They are all pioneers; trail blazers, innovators, divas, high priestesses, queens, pop culture icons and sometimes fabulous firsts” (2011:17). Womanism, like motherism, developed to address the inadequacies of Western feminism (Ebunoluwa, 2009:227).

A term coined by Alice Walker in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)*, womanism denotes “the expression of African American female leadership and that of the women of the African Diaspora” (Ferguson & King, 2011:9), though we should add here women of Africa too. Briefly, a womanist is someone who appreciates women’s culture, as well as “women’s emotional flexibility and women’s strength” (Ebunoluwa, 2009:229). She is also someone who “sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or non-sexually” and is committed to the “survival and wholeness of” an “entire people, male or female” (Ebunoluwa, 2009:229). It is important to note that “womanism differs from feminism

because it recognises the triple oppression of black women wherein racial, classist and sexist oppression is identified and fought against by womanists, as opposed to the feminism's main concern with sexist oppression" (Ebunoluwa, 2009:229). The term womanism is also defined by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi as an affirmation of "African female experience" (quoted in Ebunoluwa, 2009:230).

What this section should have made clear is that African feminisms – which includes motherism and womanism – emerged in response to Western feminisms and was aimed at exploring African conceptions of gender *from* an African point of view. Additionally, it should be clear that African feminisms and concerns about gender are as varied as Global North feminisms and offer important correctives to the ignorance of Global South conditions.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter continued the work begun in the second chapter aimed at contextualising what I mean by the 'gender question'. One of the aims was to show how feminism, gender studies and queer theory have all worked to destabilise notions of sex, gender and sexuality, even though they have at times, sometimes for political reasons as was the case in the first wave of feminism, reified existing gender categories. Butler has argued accordingly that gender feminist theory creates its own gender norms which must continually be destabilised and questioned for its assumptions and prescriptions about what gender 'ought to' be or 'is' and, more to the point, how this prevents us seeing and imagining other expressions of life, including gendered life. What African feminisms bring to light reinforces the importance of Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality by showing how gender becomes racialised and how race becomes gendered in specific ways, as well as how this makes studies of gender markedly different in terms of, for example, geographical location and its histories of violence and emancipation. Unearthing African-specific narratives of gender is also important for contextualising heteropatriarchy which continues to be an oppressive reality in many African societies. By showing that gender was conceived of differently, and in some cases more fluidly, the erroneous idea of homosexuality as unAfrican can be challenged.

Having discussed in the previous chapter how gender is used to create norms around the roles and responsibilities, obligations, values and attributes, and power associated with different people, especially those associated with the categories MAN and WOMAN, I looked more closely in this chapter at some of the responses to these historical and social constructions and their effects. In the main, I provided an overview of some of the more seminal works and central themes of both Western and African feminisms. I also provided an overview of the witch hunts in Europe which is an important counterpart to the story of women

in Africa and elsewhere in the world, especially as it relates to colonialism and capitalism. This is not to say that women had the same experience; rather, it goes to show that there are some overlaps – such as the persecution of women for being women – which can help us better contextualise the way multiple ontologies of the body developed spatially and temporally. The witch hunts, which occurred roughly at the same time that the commons began to be enclosed in Europe, can be theorised philosophically in terms of the *logic of enclosure*, as I argued. Thus, just as space was enclosed by fencing it off, so bodies became enclosed by means of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and so on. However, as Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago reminds us, the process of enclosing is a double movement of 'enclosure' and 'commoning'. By pointing this out, he reminds us of the importance of resistance and the fact that indigenous peoples and women have worked, even within enclosures, towards the creation of new *commoning* practices; that is, practices through which human solidarity is expressed, whether in the family or community. We see this clearly in the theorisations of *motherism*, an important development in African feminism to reverse the degradation of motherhood that came about with the advent of capitalism and colonialism, as is clear from the example of the witch hunts when childrearing became free labour.

Motherism does not, as noted, refer only to biological motherhood in that it includes the important roles played by women in the traditional peaceful management of the environment and indigenous knowledge. This is an important point I develop in the final chapter in which I will argue that what is needed for a truly gender-inclusive ubuntu is an onto-eco-ethical view. To do so, I draw on decolonial feminisms, Afro-feminism, Afrofuturism, indigenous cosmologies and even Western feminist theories such as that of Alaimo which worked towards the destabilisation of the Enlightenment human subject. I have also shown the important ways in which Foucault can help us understand gender as a site of knowledge, a practice of power and a form of governmentality.

4.6.1 Cartographic reflection of Chapter 4

This chapter's cartographic reflection documents counter-mapping strategies found in Afrocentric alternatives to White feminisms. In particular, I looked at the witch hunts as a colonial cartography of power and enclosure, as well as ways in which disenclosures have taken place theoretically and practically.

Please turn to the next page to view the cartographic reflection.

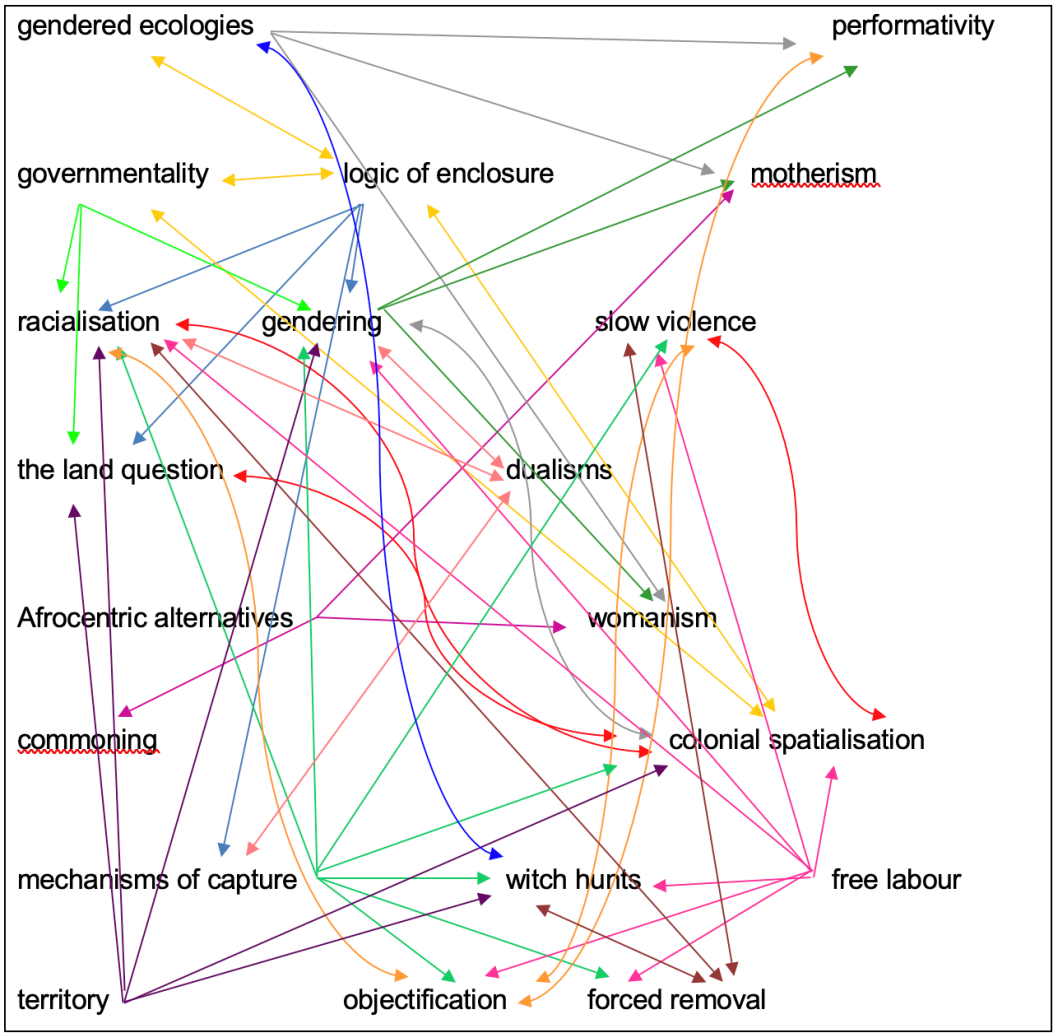

Figure 3: Cartographic reflection of Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Towards a gender-inclusive ubuntu

5.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to think about how the 'gender question' fits within the concept and practices of *ubuntu*. As I explained, for the purposes of this chapter, the 'gender question' is used as a play on the 'woman question', which refers broadly to feminist theories and activism aimed at problematising and rectifying the societal status of and afforded capacities for women from the 1400 to the 1700s, which, in the first wave of feminism, focused largely on issues of universal suffrage, more access to the public sphere, and education. The 'gender question', following transgender scholar and activist Susan Stryker, is thus aimed at queering the 'woman question' so as to include all genders, rather than women only. My reason for undertaking this study was twofold, as mentioned in the introduction. First, I noticed that while much work has been done on African feminisms by women in Gender Studies, far less has been incorporated into philosophical theorisations of ubuntu. Second, I wanted to address these lacunae, thereby also offering a more gender-inclusive framework of ubuntu.

To provide a fair overview of *ubuntu* as an African ethic comprising a multidimensional approach to humanness, I looked at definitions by well-known ubuntu scholars, as well as some inroads made by feminist scholars. What became clear is that although it is difficult to give a final authoritative definition of ubuntu, the many different definitions available can be clustered around a number of primary aspects, namely ontology/metaphysics, humanness, communalism, personhood and ethics/morality, the last mentioned being by far the most dominant in existing literature. Rather than seeing these definitions as separate, I organised them as a critical cartography – a feminist methodology aimed at drawing out not only macro-political and other determinations, but also the micro-geographies of power relations "that are simultaneously local and global" (Braidotti, 2005:176), gendered, racial, classed and so on. This also relates well to Foucault's work on subjectivity as emerging from, constrained by, and resisting mechanisms and technologies of power and knowledge. Putting such a critical cartography to work is thus to 'struggle' – or continue the feminist struggle – by other means.

Positioned as a uniquely African moral framework, ubuntu is understood as giving weight to the primacy of social or communal interests, obligations, pleasures and duties. This is not to say that there is no recognition of the individual, though it does raise the question of resistance for individuals who identify as a gender other than 'man' or 'woman', given the historical

patriarchal bias found in ubuntu, as argued by a number of scholars, and reinforced by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity which serves in turn to strengthen widespread but erroneous ideas of homosexuality as a colonial import. This raises questions about whether the community and family also form part of the regulative or governmental mechanisms of power at play in ubuntu and how this may be addressed, which I aim to do in this chapter. In the previous chapter, I addressed governmentality, arguing that it can be understood as an organising logic intrinsic to that of enclosure, the power of which lies in configuring and conducting people's actions, attitudes, affective experiences and so on. Rather than discipline, which is aimed at producing docile bodies, as Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1977:135-169), Foucault understands governmentality as a site of knowledge in that it constitutes the 'art' of governing, which has epistemic consequences in that it can both formulate a truth and specify ways for normatively practising that truth. To quote him, governmentality constitutes

> … the way in which the behavior of a set of individuals became involved, more and more markedly, in the exercise of sovereign power. This important transformation is expressed in the different "arts of governing" that were written at the end of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. No doubt, it is linked to the emergence of the "*reason* of state." […] The "reason of state" is not the imperative in the name of which one can or must upset all the other rules; it is the new matrix of rationality. (Foucault, 1997:68)

That is to say, governmentality functions as organising logic, which is not exactly the same as the logic of enclosure, though they can resonate with and reinforce each other. Thus, while we can think of land enclosures, and bodily 'enclosures' like race and gender, as motivated by a logic of enclosure, governmentality is related rather to organising logics like homophobia, heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, all of which are aimed at regulating the *interests* of groups of people. This raises another question, if ubuntu, as a uniquely African moral framework, is implicated in governmental mechanisms like patriarchy and homophobia, can it really allow for a *nonnormative dimension of gender* into its framework, even if the more general moral framework of ubuntu tends to be normative?

As I aimed to show in this thesis, this is a complex issue, given the legacy of colonialism and the views of gender it reinforced. As seen from the previous chapters, it is clear that gender was understood differently in diverse African regions and societies, many of which allowed for more fluid gendered identities and expressions, as well as more prominent and diverse roles for women. Moreover, it seems incontrovertible that homosexuality was as prevalent in Africa as anywhere else. What is a colonial import is thus not homosexuality per se, but the term 'homosexual' and its homophobic connotations. This is not to say that homophobia did not

exist in Africa at all, but rather goes to show that binary understandings of gender intensified during the colonial years. This can be understood as a result of the logics of enclosure in tandem with other organising logics like governmentality. Yet, although this is the case, it is undeniable that homophobia is widespread in many parts of Africa and touted as unAfrican by many leaders. This is despite the plethora of work on gender in precolonial Africa – including, but not limited to, that of Oyeronke Oyěwùmí, Ifi Amadiume, Obioma Nnaemeka and Catherine Acholonu – confirming the varied practices and understandings of gender.

In this chapter, my aim is to address specific aspects related to ubuntu and gender identified in the previous three chapters in order to think about whether or not ubuntu can allow for a *nonnormative dimension of gender* and thus be a truly inclusive and humane moral framework. This includes thinking about the role of the community in allowing for such a nonnormative dimension. To do so, I begin by arguing in the next section that no truly inclusive ethics could emerge from ubuntu unless the problem of ontology is addressed first. In Chapter 1, I quoted Sylvia Tamale who, while largely putting forward a jurisprudence argument in her 2020 book, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism*, nevertheless adds that decolonial feminist projects in Africa must examine "gender relations through fresh prisms and ontological frameworks" (227). However, her own arguments do not address ontology comprehensively, and this is also scarce in the literature – at least in terms of gender *and* ubuntu. Accordingly, I aim to develop this dimension in particular with reference to feminist ontologies, African ontologies, and other indigenous cosmologies for the development of a framework of ubuntu that allows for multiple ontologies. In so doing, I also address issues of humanness and personhood, the latter of which I argued cannot be gender-neutral but must, rather, move towards a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered, instead of espousing a general and abstract view thereof.

In the previous chapter, I argued that ontology must be linked to ecology, precisely because the environment and the enclosure thereof has had detrimental effects on the lives of women in particular, and especially women from indigenous groups. Linking ontology and ecology, as I will show, not only provides strategies for undoing at least some of the logics of enclosure, but also reflects an indigenous cosmology more immediately. With reference to practices of commoning, I show that many African societies have understood the deep connection between humans and nonhumans alike, and that there is scope for addressing gender more readily by having ethics flow from an onto-eco-ethical standpoint. That is, while I understand gender and race to historically and socially have become sites of knowledge entwined with practices of power that have themselves begun to function as organising principles and logics to produce, demarcate and control bodies in specific ways, I show how de- and anti-colonial

strategies like commoning can work to reposition and redefine these towards epistemic reparation. As practices of resistance, strategies of this kind offer new ways of seeing and thinking about gender, including ways in which bodies can question their emplacement in relation to other bodies, to space and to time by withdrawing from fixed positions. To explicate what I mean, I link this practice of withdrawal with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of fugitivity, which I develop in relation to Tamale's work on decolonisation and Afro-feminism, as well as Afrofuturism, to think about the future of ubuntu, and specifically about what a truly gender-inclusive ubuntu would look like and *do.*

5.2 Multiple ontologies

In her article, "Patriarchal Forms of National Community in Post-apartheid Literature", Amy Duvenage argues that narratives of indigeneity and origin "were celebrated in the transition to democracy in South Africa" (2022:691), a recovery which Siphokazi Magadla and Ezra Chitando suggest is due to "the attention that Ubuntu has received in [the first two] decades of democratic consolidation" (2014:176, quoted in Duvenage, 2022:691). Duvenage goes on to argue with reference to the work of Magadla and Chitando (2014:176), that far less attention has been given to the relations between men and women or even "what it means to be a man and a woman within this context". Looking at recent South African literature (fiction) by younger black authors, Duvenage argues that their narratives reinforce "patriarchal discourses of ubuntu" by upholding indigenous traditions (2022:699). She supports this argument by referring to a number of novels, one of which is *The Reactive* (2016) by Masande Ntshanga, in which one of the protagonists, Lindanathi, must be circumcised in order to "become a man in the traditions of his ancestors" (2016:699). Because his younger brother died in the process of being circumcised, "Lindanathi injects himself with HIV/AIDS to avoid" a similar fate, thus becoming a person without ubuntu. Duvenage goes on to argue that Lindanathi's journey back to ubuntu or personhood is gendered – and I quote at length:

> [M]en occupy positions of power and privilege. His uncle, for example, has the authority to bring Lindanathi home and help him to complete the amaXhosa initiation process. In comparison, the women in his life are silent or absent. His mother and his aunt hardly feature on this journey. Neither does Ntshanga [another character] appear to challenge sexualized stereotypes. Rather, he uses women to numb his feelings of unbelonging: Cecelia is too weak to confront her dying mother, so she uses drugs and sex to medicate her pain. […] Finally, Esona seals Lindanathi's personhood when she requests that he "fuck [her] like a new man" and when, later, "on her knees on the kitchen floor, Esona releases [him]" (Ntshanga, 2016:160).

Like Mda, Ntshanga's female characters must be in positions of subservience and servitude (Duvenage, 2022:699-700).

There are, clearly, overtones of patriarchy and heteronomativity here, though these narratives have themselves been complexified through films like *Inxeba* (The Wound"). Critically acclaimed both nationally and internationally, this 2017 film tells the story of a factory worker, Xolani Radebe, who joins a group of young initiates in the mountains of the Eastern Cape. The film investigates initiation as a means of passage from boyhood to manhood – and even personhood, as Duvenage argues. Although there has been much antagonism about the film's setting and the divulging of cultural norms and traditions around initiation, it actually focuses less on the initiation ceremonies than on the secret love affair between Xolani (Nakhane Touré) and Vija (Bongile Mantsai) as an exploration of masculinity, homosexuality, and the organisation of desire in patriarchal settings. Striking about *Inxeba* is what must be done to get rid of homosexual desire. Towards the end of the film, as the initiates are preparing to return home, Xolani goes in search of his initiate, Kwanda, who seems to have disappeared and who has also threatened to expose Vija and Xolani's affair to Vija's wife and children. When Xolani eventually finds Kwanda, asleep in the mountains, Kwanda admits to having become lost. "There's a highway close by," is Xolani's only answer. They begin to argue. At some point, Xolani turns to Kwanda, informing him of another way down. The scene cuts and we see Kwanda looking over the cliff at the waterfall. "You said there was a path – " he says, turning to look at Xolani who hits him on the head with a rock. Viewers hear the sound of the waterfall but are left wondering whether or not Kwanda is dead.

What this depiction shows is that although men continue to enjoy patriarchal privileges, this is only the case *if* they also conform to and reproduce both hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. In his article on the fatherhood crisis triggered by, for example, fathers working away from home and children growing up without male guidance, Alois Rutsviga draws on ubuntu for inspiration, arguing that it is foundational for thinking about "African people's ontological hierarchy or order of reality" (2024:6). He states further that the "most fundamental and basic concept in Bantu thought is vital force" which he equates with God (2024:6). Although this moves the concept of ontology to a nonhuman force, this does not solve the gender question, given that homosexuality has been described as ungodly. The problem with ontology is that African ontologies have become entwined with the histories of colonialism, as well as that of Christianity. According to Barry Smith (2004:155), "ontology as a branch of philosophy is the science of what is, of the kinds of structures of" subjects, "objects, properties, events, processes and relations in every area of reality". At times, it is understood as a subset of metaphysics, while at other times these two terms are used interchangeably.

The question of ontology can be traced back to the pre-Socratics, with the Milesians grappling with the question of what the foundational governing principle of the world is and, relatedly, how 'chaos' is turned into 'cosmos' – not wholly unlike the African notion of a vital force. For example, Anaximander, a then-prominent figure committed to the knowledge of the world, had a "material starting point, or *arche*, of the cosmos" which he called the *apeiron* (Hutchins, 2019:1). Anaximander thus "seems to have believed that the cosmos began when two fundamental material principles break out of the *apeiron*: the hot and the cold" (2019:1). This developed into idealist ontology with Plato, who thought that that reality – the reality of our world – is an imperfect reflection of the world of perfect ideal forms. Later, Descartes would introduce a dualist ontology which, as argued in the previous chapter, became a powerful force for strengthening dualisms like nature/culture, man/woman, human/nonhuman, black/white, and so on. In other words, rather than merely being a philosophy, it became a system of differentiation.

The well-known case of Saartjie Baartman is a point in kind. From the start of colonialism, Europeans turned black bodies into 'uncivilised' ones, though the case of women (racialised gender) was subjected to even more scrutiny. The Khoisan South African woman, Saartjie Baartman, also referred to as the 'Hottentot Venus', was "taken to England in 1810 and became a popular attraction as a freak show exhibition for her 'steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, amid popular speculation of her genitalia" (Wiss, 1994:2 quoted in Ras, 2017:n.p.). Isabella Ras goes on to argue that to Europeans, Baartmans "was primitive, bestial and crudely sexual" when in reality she was someone who had been "alienated from her identity and her motherland" (2017:18). Baartman was, of course, not the only woman to suffer this way, but what her case makes clear is how race and gender – and racialised gender – became fundamental to ontological configuration and, over time, invisabilised and normalised.

When one looks at the effects and outcomes of colonisation it is impossible not to lament the pain, ridicule and torture that Baartman was exposed to at the hands of the coloniser. Her life experience is just a reflection of the experiences that women of colour have had in their lifetimes, suffering as a result of colonisation and marginalised and oppressed because of historical injustice. The concept of ubuntu in relation to the racialised gendered dynamics post colonisation should be scrutinised for several reasons, which all amount to ubuntu being portrayed in a good light at face value but practically not meeting some of societies expectations. Ubuntu in African philosophy is a humanistic ethic that should have principles related to harmony, solidarity, justice, restoration and interconnectedness between people. However, one may argue that it does fall short when it comes to women or women of colour

who have faced systematic inequalities that are based on race and gender, as highlighted by Baartman's story.

Amongst other social challenges, ubuntu attempts to promote race and gender in society by promoting communal relationships, trying to eradicate gender-based violence and advocating for reconciliation within communities. However, it can be argued that ubuntu is still yet to address and combat the struggles and marginalisation that women of colour face. We therefore need to have an honest conversation about how women's bodies have been racialised and sexualised and are often seen as objects of pleasure and gratification. The perpetuating struggles that women face need to be evaluated through dialogue, in which the aim is for an inclusive understanding of ubuntu that will address the historical injustice that women have faced and which they still do (Ras, 2017:11). "The discussion of Baartman serves to illustrate the physicality of the colonial gaze, in which the anthropology underlying European contact with Baartman illustrated a distorted view on African lives and bodies" (2017:4). As a historical figure, Baartman's story highlights the racialised and gendered exploitation that African women have experienced during colonisation. The unfortunate part is that this racialised and gendered exploitation is still evident in some African communities and did not stop post colonisation. Molly Manyonganise (2015) emphasises this perpetuated gendered exploitation in Zimbabwe. Manyonganise critically evaluates the Shona proverbs that are well known in Shona communities. These proverbs illustrate the cultural attitudes and beliefs regarding the roles that women play in society.

"*Chakafukidza dzimba Matenga*" (Manyonganise, 2015:3) is a proverb that was used to silence women in response to husbands, where the abusive partner would continue with the abuse behind closed doors and the general public would not know about it. The Shona use the word *'munhu'* to distinguish between a boy and a girl child. After a child is born, people ask the question *'muhui?*' – referring to the gender of the child. If it is a girl, they will say *'hapana munhu azvarwa'* (no human being has been given birth to); if it is a boychild they will say *'kwave nemunhu'* (we now have a human being) (2015:2). If a woman continues to give birth in marriage to girl children, she must continue trying for a boy child since only he is considered to be human. It can be argued that the application of ubuntu or *hunhu* to Bantu people is discriminatory and oppressive towards women. *"Vakadzi ngavanyarare"* (meaning women should be quiet at traditional courts) refers to the fact that women are not welcome to speak, as decisions are made by men while women have to just sit there and listen (2015:2). *"Mukadzi mutsvuku akasaroya anoba"* is a stereotypical proverb in terms of the representation of women (a woman who is light in complexion, if she is not a witch then she is a witch). This proverb was meant to warn men about beautiful women as they had their shortcomings. As a

result, beautiful women would feel indebted to the men who were courageous enough to marry them and had to prove beyond doubt that they were more than their beauty and that neither were they witches or thieves (2015:3). These are just some of the proverbs that imply various domestic issues and beliefs regarding women, as they explain the societal norms in the Shona culture. Perhaps the future of ubuntu needs to be-evaluated from a womanist perspective, which would promote women's liberty and restore their dignity.

This, I would argue, is also why gender-based violence has become so normalised; Pfarelo Matshila (2022) mentions in her autobiography the unpleasant experience that she had in the labour ward when she was giving birth. Noting the lack of ubuntu that came with what should have been a joyful experience, she laments that she is not the only woman who has suffered due to obstetric violence in the maternity ward of a public hospital, and details other experiences of mothers who have given birth in the public sector. John Sanni and Diana Ofana (2021), in *Recasting the Ontological Foundation of Ubuntu: Addressing the Problem of Gender-based Violence in South Africa,* also discuss the gender-based violence that is prominent in the South African landscape. They look at the issue of gender from the African philosophical position of ubuntu, while taking into consideration the ontological foundation of ubuntu. They argue that the conception of ubuntu in addressing the issue of gender needs to be reemphasised in ways that challenge this issue and the validation of violence against women. In showing the misconception of gender and gender roles in ubuntu they argue that violence against women can be read as indicative of the ontological misconception of the women "I" in the "we". From a gender perspective, they aim to engage the "I" in the "we" and the "we" that makes up the "I". This then leads to the argument that there is an ontologically unrecognisable, violated and oppressed "I" in the "we" that needs emancipation.

Mpho Tshivhase recasts ubuntu by arguing that is should be founded on love, though "a disinterested love" rather than one denoting romance or even friendship (2018:203). This kind of love, she goes on to argue, "exists for its own sake and not for the sake of causing something else to happen" (2018:203), meaning ubuntu should not be practised in relation only to people known to an individual, or people who conform to certain gender norms, but should rather be a *universal* moral ethic emerging from ubuntu's ontological progression towards personhood. Ubuntu scholars like Mogobe Ramose, as shown in the first chapter, understands this with reference to the root of ubuntu, namely 'ntu', and the prefix 'ubu-', where the 'ntu' designates the epistemological aspect which "can be present in the world as a thing, a place and time, a modality or a human being", while the 'ubu-' denotes the ontological aspect (2015:324-325).

Interestingly, as Tshivhase notes, Symphorien Ntibagirirwa "interrogates the idea of the human as the locus of Ubuntu", arguing instead that the '-ntu' "is the general/universal force, instead of the 'ubu-'" (2018:202). In response, Tshivhase argues that there might be a "foundation that gives meaning to Ubuntu outside of its instrumental purpose for human beings", which she argues could be love (2018:202). The advantage of this argument is that love "becomes valuable in and of itself" and extends beyond the relationship ubuntu has to humanity – an important aspect for thinking about an onto-eco-ethics as I will show. This also resonates with recent work in new materialist and critical posthuman feminism, where many scholars have argued for a monist ontology with reference to the work of Spinoza. Rosi Braidotti argues accordingly that the use of a monistic philosophy is that it "rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature–culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter" (2013:3). She goes on to contend that the "work of post-colonial and race theorists displays a situated cosmopolitan posthumanism that is supported as much by the European tradition as by non-Western sources of moral and intellectual inspiration" (46). Ubuntu scholar, Thaddeus Metz, contrasts the views of 'essence' in Afro-relational and Western individualist ontologies, arguing that the latter views essence in terms of intrinsic properties, while African philosophy places an emphasis on the relational properties (2019:210). This is true largely of analytic philosophy, although scholars like Gilbert Simondon argue for a relational view through his concept of *transindividuation* (see for example Bluemink, 2021). Metz's point about Afro-relationality is valid though and provides a good foundation for rethinking gendered hierarchies.

5.2.1 African and African feminist ontologies and indigenous cosmologies

African ontology, according to Kanu (2014:54), should be understood in terms of two causes, namely the ontological cause and the functional cause. The ontological cause is what produces a being as the effect of a more fundamental vital force, which sometimes, but not always, is thought of as God. The second cause therefore explains the reason for the operations of a being in relation to other beings, which includes, in many African cosmologies, earth-dwelling beings as well as the land of the spirits (2014:57). What this means in essence is that death is not viewed as the final stage of a person's life. Rather, the dead are understood to continue living in an afterlife (Socrates, 2019:22). There is therefore a coexistence between the spiritual and the physical world. Because the ontological dimension has a functional aspect, it extends to the role of the community. According to Kanu, the freedom of the individual must therefore align with this metaphysical obligation (2014:49). As such, morality emerges from the ontological (Socrates, 2019:24). For this reason, I argue, it is imperative to rethink ontology in its gendered and ecological dimensions. Elvis Imafidon calls this the

“ontological equilibrium principle”, by which he means that “disequilibrium among beings, in general, and among persons, in particular, leads to chaos to the extent that it leads to inhumanity. If a person is a person through other persons, the dislocation of persons, individual or collective, from other persons, produces non-persons or inhumanity by implication” (2022:9-10). This includes addressing the “lived experiences and practical issues in African societies such as corruption, gender, disability, differences, diversity and inclusion, and personhood” (2022:2).

African feminists, like Oyěwùmí, have argued that Western feminist ontologies have, at least in the past, promoted a rigid binary dichotomy between the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, concurrently promoting particular and rather rigidly determine gendered social roles. As noted in the previous chapter, Oyěwùmí argues that the notion of ‘woman’ did not exist as a social category in Yoruba communities as the “body was (and still is) very corporeal” (1997:x). She also draws attention to the ways in which colonial rulers enforced a particular view of race and gender as part of the logics of enclosure that motivated the colonial project more broadly. By challenging the dichotomous view of gender, Oyěwùmí brings attention to some of the ways in which ontology became subject to the logics of enclosure and thus challenges us to critically examine not only Western ontologies, but also the normalisation of Western ontologies in African ontologies, including their gendered and racial dimensions.

Peggy Ntseane (2011:307) adds that a distinction should be made between the Afrocentric paradigm and African feminism. So, whereas the Afrocentric paradigm focuses on the question of African identity and those who have been marginalised by colonialism, African feminism should demonstrate the relevance of African women to the development of critical learning perspectives, such as transformational theory (2011:314). However, I would add that this needs to have an ontological dimension. Without this, the logic of enclosure will extend only to the epistemological realm by ‘including’ women in patriarchal systems to make them seem more gender-inclusive, while addressing ontology has the capacity to rearrange the foundations from which epistemology emerges.

In addition, Oyěwùmí also points to the importance of motherhood, though her normalisation of women as nurturers should be critically viewed, especially given that this can unburden men of their own nurturing responsibilities and place the burden of care on women. Nevertheless, her example of the “Iya’s relationship with” a child, which is “considered to be otherworldly, pre-earthly, pre-conceptional, pregestational, pre-social, prenatal, post-natal ad post humous” (Oyěwùmí, 2016:62), points to the fact that a person’s life does not end at the point of death in African metaphysics. This calls to mind theorisations on *motherism* which, as shown in the previous chapter, refers to more than just childbearing in that it also points to other roles that

women can fulfil, including the traditional peaceful management of the environment and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. However, one possible problem with motherism, as we see also with Oyěwùmí, is its focus on mothers as nurturers which not only reinforces seemingly natural differences between women and men as nurturers and providers, but also implicitly sidelines women who can't or don't want to have children (Nkealah, 2016). Thus, although I argue in the final section of this chapter that motherism can be pivotal for rethinking the relations between ontology and ecology, I turn first to the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on indigenous Amerindian culture for reasons that will become clear.

In his work, Castro discusses two important concepts, the first of which is *perspectivism*. As he explains, typically

> … humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however [according to Amerindian cosmology] animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture (Castro, 1998:470).

The point that Castro is making here is that, if one is to successfully negotiate one's position in the world as it relates to other beings, including nonhuman beings and the more-than-human world, one must be capable of adopting the perspective of the other, "as shamans do when they become animals" (Castro & Skafish, 2013:15). From this develops a 'perspectivist' cosmology which "confers on all beings the same ontological status" which might be understood as a "multinaturalism" or "naturalist multiculturalism" (15). It also allows for the emergence of a world constituting a "society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*" in which the ontological status between human and human (e.g. man and woman, or woman and transwoman) is equal, in the same way as the ontological status between a cultural society and the environment is (Castro & Danowski, 2015:n.p.).

I argue that incorporating perspectivism and *cosmopoliteia* into ubuntu is one way for addressing the patriarchal legacy of ubuntu and homophobic tendencies in many African countries. This is especially important because ontology is directly related to an individual attaining personhood, and thus humanity, in full. Lindokuhle Gama argues relatedly that although proponents of Afro-personhood contend that ubuntu is gender-neutral in nature because of its ontological features, she argues that, while this may be true of its ideals, is not in practice as it actually threatens the "moral value of Blackwomxn", so spelled to point out "the conceptual necessity of announcing" their "intersectional experience" and the daily "micro-

aggressions that subtly, but systematically, work to undermine the value of womxn and enforce their secondary social status" (2023:390). One reason for this is that frameworks like ubuntu "are loaded with asymmetrical power relations that treat Blackwomxn's personhood" (391), which raises questions regarding the gendered affordances of ubuntu. Again, this is a complex issue as the notion of a universal Afro-personhood and ontology has been used as a tool for epistemic resistance to universalising Western ontologies. In particular, the emphasis on Afro-communitarianism was understood to provide conceptions of personhood that were radically different from the individualist notions found in European and US philosophies (393).

Gama goes on to outline the necessary ontological features of personhood in African theories, which includes biological and mental capacities and features, relationality, and "the processual aspect of human nature" (2023:394). Together, these three ontological features form the normative dimension of personhood. For scholars in the field, this threefold normative dimension does not in itself constitute personhood because while it is the *necessary* condition for achieving personhood, it is not the *sufficient* condition, the latter of which, according to Ifeanyi Menkiti, requires that the "initially biologically given" individual be submitted to "a process of social and ritual transformation, so as to attain the full complement of excellences seen as definitive of the person" (2004:326). Through this, the moral status of personhood is thus achieved, as can be seen. For Gama, the existence of heteropatriarchy as regulative norm violates the necessary condition of personhood so that the sufficient condition cannot be attained in full by default. Accordingly, what seems to be gender-neutral norms, like "solidarity, interconnectedness, or seniority among others, must be understood within the purview of the intersectional nature of systems of oppression" (2023:400), of which race is only one part.

Additionally, when exclusive attention is paid to race, it can invisibilise gender. I contend that this can be rectified through perspectivism, although I want to justify this argument because perspectivism has received some criticism from feminists, notably for "the reluctance to treat the question of gender philosophically and/or to identify gender as a radically contentious idea in Amerindian thought" (Gama, 2023:588). In other words, incorporating perspectivism should not boil down to an affirmation of the "exchangeability of women" (586). Rather, it should be understood in the spirit of Afro-futurism and Afro-feminism; that is, as an attempt to imagine a world in which Africans play a central role in the ontologies of the world, although instead of espousing a general and abstract view of personhood, it should move towards a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered because only then can affordance be better understood as it relates to gendered personhood. I extend this argument in the next section on Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism and Afro-feminism.

5.2.2 Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism and Afro-feminism

In this section, I move the question of ontology from what it *is* to what it can *do.* That is, I question the affordances of ubuntu ontology in terms of gender. As has been argued, a gender-neutral view of personhood does not hold water. Thus, it needs to be extended in some way, which Sylvia Tamale has argued convincingly for in terms of Afro-feminism, itself better understood with some reference to Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Devy as a response to postmodernity and its broader epistemic project (Eseonu & Okoye, 2023:3). “Afrofuturism combines science fiction and fantasy to re-examine how the future is currently imagined and to re-construct futures thinking with deeper insight into the black experience, especially as slavery forced Africans to confront an alien world surrounded by colonial technologies” (Brooks, 2016:156). It also speaks to the nature of black people’s relationship with the cosmos and “addresses the metaphysical question of the structure of reality” (130).

One of the movement’s inspirational figures is Octavia E. Butler, Afrofuturist writer and thinker who also upholds that it is a movement in which black people can create an alternative worldview, or then *worldsense*, following Oyěwùmí (see Chapter 3). An example of an Afrofuturist worldsense can be found in the 2018 film, *Black Panther*, which shows what it means for black people to live on their own terms. Temidayo Eseonu and Florence Okoye attest that “it is both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory that is concerned with the racial equity and technological agency to create emergent liberatory systems” (2023:1). In other words, it is about *transforming perspectives* and can, as such, be understood as an example of contemporary perspectivism. Arit Oku argues, however, that there is a need for understanding the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, the latter being better demonstrated in, for example, the science fiction literature of Nnedi Okorafor, such as her short story “Mother of Invention” (2018) and the novel *Binti* (2015) (Oku, 2021:75).

Although there are many connections between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, with distinctions sometimes being rather subtle, the former leans towards the depiction of African sensibilities rather than African American affectivity (Oku, 2021:77). Also striking of Africanfuturism is that women are frequently portrayed as “equal participants with males, and beneficiaries of the progress achieved in technology and other areas” (78). As Oku shows, Okorafor’s “Mother of Invention” draws “deeply from the traditional and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people”, also bringing “alive the culture and lifestyle of the Himba” (2021:83). There are also strong ecofeminist undertones, which operate from “the premise that women are largely responsible for harnessing the earth’s resources to nurture their families through domestic food production, and therefore must guard jealously this earth-wealth”, as Wangari Maathai

has done with her Greenbelt Movement (84). This resonates with Tamale's view of decolonisation as a "multi-pronged process of liberation from political, economic and cultural colonization", which includes "[r]emoving the anchors of colonialism from the physical, ecological and mental processes of a nation and its people" (2020:xiv). For her, Afro-feminism must engage "traditional ecofeminist ecologies as one approach to sustainable human livelihoods that will also guarantee environmental health and justice" (34). Interestingly, we find here again the strong link between women and ecological health. For Tamale, social justice in Africa must be connected to both decolonisation and Afro-feminism, both of which she argues share with *ubuntu* a focus on human dignity, solidarity, respect and communitarianism. And yet, as she points out, it seems ironic that some of the most publicly displayed homophobia comes from African presidents, including the former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe; the current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni; and the former South African President, Jacob Zuma, who, in 2007, stated that same-sex marriages were a "disgrace to the nation and to God" (quoted in Tamale, 2020:116). According to Tamale, "as part of the decolonial feminist project, Africa must begin to examine itself and theorize its gender relations through fresh prisms and ontological frameworks" by using ubuntu as "a mechanism for vigorously engaging with life questions" because ubuntu "provides the basis on which to adopt principles of justice that give more weight to the wellbeing of the group than the individual in the logic of coloniality" (2020:229). Yet, as I have shown, it is not necessarily that gendered bodies come off worst, because there are no bodies that are ungendered.To her credit, Tamale argues for ubuntu to be combined with Afro-feminism which, like Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, also rethinks social justice in terms of creativity. Just as Afrofuturism advocates for an epistemic liberation, so too does Afrofeminism in that it provides a framework for addressing "systems of oppression by re-defining these systems" and the "modes of critical enquiry" used to "understand racialised hegemonies and power structures" (2020:3). Important for Tamale is the fact that Afrofeminism is distinguishable from Global North practices and theories because the experiences of women across the world, while similar in some ways, have very local "flavours", especially in terms of equality and human dignity. As Tamale writes, "the danger of evaluating African cultures on the basis of categories of Western value schemes is that the latter is given epistemic pre-eminence. For example, polygamy is equated to patriarchy. It is therefore crucial to move away from the dichotomous evaluation of women's identity in diametrical opposition to a man's that occurs in Western studies" (2020:228). Afrofeminism thus advocates for a perspective that reflects indigenous knowledge systems, just as ubuntu, which, according to Tamale, can aid the creation of normative standards of being based on the maxim 'I am because we are' rather than the Western notion of 'I think therefore I am' (2020:231). Thaddeus Metz has argued, similarly, that the "moral-theoretic interpretation of ubuntu" requires of one to "develop one's

humanness by honouring friendly relationships (of identity and solidarity) with others who have dignity by virtue of their inherent capacity to engage in such relationships" (2016:547). Metz thus advocates for human rights by contending that ubuntu has to be interpreted and applied in a manner that promotes human rights and, most importantly, human dignity. This should be done through the interrelation of individuals in the community. He argues elsewhere that ubuntu, as a moral theory, states and sets the tone for what is right and wrong (Metz, 2011:537). What Tamale adds, however, is that it can be used as a unifying motif to address inequalities and violence in our societies (2020:233).

Violence, here, is multifaceted and refers to the exploitation and oppression inherited from the colonial era and "buttressed by other systems such as class and capitalism" (Tamale, 2020:14). It also refers to gender-related violence, oppression and obstacles, all of which disproportionately affect women and other LGBTQI+ persons in societies, ranging from domestic responsibility and violence to flippant sexist attitudes. In attempts to dismantle gender inequalities, Tamale argues that we should adopt the indigenous values of ubuntu and place an emphasis on 'ubuntu for women' and 'ubuntu for all'. This, for Tamale, requires that the social dimensions that define 'men' and 'women' are reinvestigated and reshaped, especially given that the concept of 'equality' – including between men and women – is "predicated upon fundamental but flawed notions of liberal individualism and universalism", which ignore "intersectional differences and oppressions" (2020:210). As a result, the "multiple identities that intersect with gender such as race, ethnicity, class, religion and sexuality are invisible and glossed over" (210). In contrast, the values of ubuntu, including social justice, equity and human dignity, "resonate much more with the traditional understandings of most African people" (211). For her, this rethinking takes place largely within advocacy, legal and jurisprudence frameworks which, while essential, do not address the fact that epistemic liberation and justice cannot be attained without first addressing ubuntu's asymmetry in gender affordances resulting from its patriarchal and colonial legacies. Thus, a more nuanced view of gendered ontologies can only come about if there is a more ethical production of knowledge, which means that power imbalances must be acknowledged and addressed, so as to shift the power away from hegemonic feminisms.

So, while both ubuntu and Afrofeminism are important for helping refocus attention on Africa, little attention is placed on the political and economic landscape that shows the different dynamics that African people face within their communities. Also, in Tamale's advocacy for traditional frameworks of human rights, there seems to be a tension between addressing contemporary issues of justice in societies with different cultural backgrounds. Again, my argument is that this is because ontology has not been sufficiently addressed. In other words,

human rights, like the criminalisation of same-sex sexual activity often stems from stereotypes or beliefs about sex and gender. Thus they are assigned a specific ontological status from which homophobic and other related beliefs and actions emerge. To understand the undoing of such ontologies, I theorise this in terms of the logic of disenclosure or commoning and fugitivity.

5.3 The logic of *dis*enclosure: Commoning, opacity and fugitivity

In the second chapter of this thesis, I focused on what Achille Mbembe refers to as the *logic of enclosure*, which can be defined as a set of practices that enclose a space (commons) as well as humans (via racialisation, gender and so on). Also worth noting is that enclosure became a legitimised form of state capture during the 12th century and lasted until the end of the 19th century in England. The purpose of this chapter was thus to provide a broad overview of how enclosure was enacted in Europe and in Africa, highlighting the common links between these as well as the divergences that came about with the colonial conquests. What is clear, is that enclosures affected women extensively because it goes along with processes of appropriation that has to do with common land or resources. This enforces some type of segregation and dispossesses individuals (especially women) or communities of their rights to access and usage of shared spaces. The witch-hunt trials also served to enforce economic dispossession because it was men who were often enriched from these processes.

These enclosures also had detrimental effects on the environment, as they often came along with monocrops. In *Against the Grain*, the anthropologist James C. Scott, argues that, seen from the perspective of the state, enclosures were “an effort to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become, to use the French term, *rentable* – auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange” (2009:4). In other words, the enclosure movement was “culturally styled as development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration”, though in practice it was aimed rather at making economic activity taxable and confiscatable (4-5). In addition, “open common-property land tenure” was replaced by “closed common property” such as collective farms, which were “encouraged, whenever possible” to be “plantation-style agriculture” – in other words monocrops – “in place of the more biodiverse forms of cultivation that prevailed earlier” (5). These enclosures thus had a double ‘civilising’ objective, namely to ‘tame’ nature as well as people, the latter through race, gender and so on.

With reference to race and gender, these enclosures should be understood ontologically, and especially in terms of the constraints and affordances that emerge from ontological enclosures. Part of the problem is the way in which social constructions and ideologies like

‘race’ and ‘gender’ become naturalised. What I mean by ideology here is the “persistent and systematic distortions in collective cultural resources that function to perpetuate oppressive forms of life, the existence of which is at least partly explained by this function” (Jenkins, 2023:49). One function of ideology is to render these distortions *structural* so that they appear as if they are “natural and appropriate” (49). While the affordances flowing from these are often addressed, for example in terms of education for women or rights for LGBTQI+ persons, among others, this is already at the level of ethics and epistemology, although the injustice is deeper than this and must be addressed ontologically. One way in which this can be addressed is through the incorporation of a *logic of* dis*enclosure* or *commoning* which I understand ontologically rather than only as pertaining to the pooling of resources etc., although this would be the natural ethical and epistemological outcome.

As Frantz Fanon argues, the proof of decolonisation’s success “lies in a whole structure being changed from the bottom up” (2004:35), which means that the “*order* of the world” must be changed” rather than merely paying attention to the “historical form and content” thereof (36, emphasis added). Commoning, as I understand it, calls for thinking about ontology as multidimensional and perspectival, thus making it capable of incorporating the entirety of life, including human life in all its expressions, such as its gendered expressions (*self*-expression rather than enforced enclosure). As with African feminist scholars, other Global South scholars like the “Aymara-Bolivian feminist decolonial intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has done substantial revision work on precolonial Andean gender structures and the way in which they guaranteed indigenous women security, power, participation, and voice” (Matallana-Peláez, 2020:376). Nevertheless, decolonial scholars have some way to go in terms of understanding “the extensive range of action and empowerment that women in the Americas enjoyed before the European conquest, and how it was slowly eroded under colonial rule” (381). The same is true for the African continent.

Relatedly, Miguel León Portilla points out “the importance of fluid duality as a core concept in Mesoamerican thought” (León-Portilla, 2006:387). Not only is there a notion of fluid duality, though, because as Susana Matallana-Peláez argues, there are numerous resonating studies, like that of Matthew Looper who reported “that same-sex sexuality and ritual transvestism were dominant creation metaphors among the Maya” (Looper, 2001, quoted in Matallana-Peláez, 2020:383), while other studies have brought to light the fabrication of a third sex by the Inuit; androgyny in pre-Columbian America; the “third-gendered subjectivities” found in the Andes; and a third-gender which was “a normative status among Native North Americans” (Matallana-Peláez, 2020:383). This, as shown in Chapter 2, was also the case in many African societies, the examples of ‘female husbands’ and ‘male daughters’ being a case in point. It

also points more generally to the "usefulness of detailed ethnographic works as foundations on which to stand or begin" to reconceive of local gendered ontologies, "given the erasures of the colonial imperialist project" (Magadla *et al*., 2021:5), and concurrently, shift our "values and knowledge" (Magadla *et al*., 2021:5). However, as Matallana-Peláez goes on to argue, without movement, these conceptualisations are sterile. Thus a revision of ontology calls for something like the "third-gendered mediators, Kolhamana and Nadleehi", of the Zuni and Diné tribes who link "not only gender and sexuality to movement and continuity, but the very definition of being" (Matallana-Peláez, 2020:384).

Lucy Nicholas argues that for a truly co-constitutive ontological position to exist, the "relationship between self, others and situation, and the picture of agency it paints, is best characterised as *situated capacity*" which is itself premised on *situated affordances* (2014:93). According to her, Simone de Beauvoir's "ambiguous" ontology is useful here in that it understands "the existence of others as a freedom" that "defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (De Beauvoir, 1976:91, quoted in Nicholas, 2014:93). Nicholas goes on to argue that this idea is "echoed in the 'ambivalent scene of agency'" described by Judith Butler in her understanding of ontology (Butler, 1997:15, quoted in Nicholas, 2014:93). However, in Butler's conception of ontology, *opacity* "is the condition that the self is never fully transparent to the self, but that simultaneously, and ethically, 'there is a desire for norms that might let one live'" (Butler, 2004:3, quoted in Nicholas, 2014:93). This notion of *opacity* is closely related to both the notions of *withdrawal* and *fugitivity*, all of which are important because they leave room for ontological *movement.* In other words, we need something like a 'transversal' conception of ontology to capture the *processes* that *give rise to* identities but are pre-personal. Transversality is itself a cartographical concept. As Helen Palmer and Stanimir Panayotov explain:

> Just as the word itself signifies in terms of the type of line you might draw when writing by hand, transversality opposes both verticality (in the sense of hierarchies and leaders) and horizontality, in the sense of groups of people organising themselves within a particular "section" or compartment (Palmer & Panayotov, 2016:n.p.).

The radicality of the concept 'transversality' lies in its capacity to hold many positions at once. Thus, it allows for ontologies to be fluid, opaque, fugitive, etc., but precisely because it is open to contingency and movement. In terms of opacity, the Martinican writer, poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant, understands opacity as that "which protects the Diverse" (1997:62). This "irreducible opacity" (115) suggests not just the "impossibility of epistemological comprehension" (64), as Benjamin Davis argues, but rather points to the irreducibility of relational ontology in regard to categories like MAN, WOMAN or GENDER.

5.3.1 Opacity

Li (2019) depicts Glissant's view of opacity as an aspect that we cannot ignore, as it helps shape our realities and experiences. "It allows for cultural expression and takes into account our identities pre-colonization. Opacity is therefore an alternative to grasping, because it aims to promote relationality without domination or control. This is because we are different people who come from diverse backgrounds, which is the reason why Glissant highlights "the other of thought" (Li, 2019:866). His work also helps us to pay attention to the interconnectedness that exists between us, which we all experience as it cannot be avoided. According to Li (2019:859), opacity "denotes the linguistic expression of material alterity. It means an involuntary flourishing of linguistically enhanced dynamics if exchange, connection and making in the landscapes of compelling affordances". It can further be defined as "what resists and contests understanding" (2019:866). It helps with our imagination in that it allows us to engage with reality without any imposed ideas, and aids in understanding as well as acknowledging complexities. As a precolonial strategy, opacity looks at the trauma experienced by the Caribbean people. It can therefore be used as a tool that helps us deal with the effects of colonisation. Thus, challenging gendered ontologies cannot simply be aimed at better optics, but must allow for contingency and even the possibility of unknowability; that is, the unknowability of gender according to existing frameworks.

Martins (2022) expands further on the concept of opacity. He attests that "with opacity, we are confronted with what remains in the corners of our vision. Opacity lies at the crossroads of change, it is an invitation to examine our own impulses that which we are expected to seek, to desire to yearn for" (2022:83). Opacity has several key ideas in that it rejects and challenges the expectations that everything needs to be categorised according to the existing frameworks that we find in society, such as race and gender as they are understood in western frameworks. According to Martins (2022) there are documentaries and art pieces that aim to show how ethnographic tendencies can be resisted, and how diverse boundaries can be made and enforced. An example of this is Tiare Ribeaux's artwork, which presents screens as protective boundaries instead of diverse borders. In *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues* (2021) Raili Marling contends that opacity can also be used as a feminist and decolonial strategy in order to respond to neoliberalism. Opacity, in this instance, advocates for the transparency and legibility which make people visible and susceptible to oppressive forms and domination from the state. Opacity can therefore be used as a tool to challenge co-optation from neoliberalism. He attests that "Glissants notion of opacity does not exclude solidarity or what he calls relation. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does

is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try and become the other (to become other) not to 'make' him in my image" (2021:103).

Opacity can function and thrive in as a feminist strategy since it rejects any type of control and projections of conformity to the societal norms and standards that may be imposed by state power. The feminist groups have the liberty to reject any proposals of conforming to the orthodox standards of society. These groups are able to resist being commodified or being policed by the state. What is important in this regard is that opacity has the potential of protecting their subversive knowledge and ensuring that it is not used without their consent or knowledge (Marling, 2021).

5.3.2 Fugitivity

In *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue that to enter the "undercommons" is not to enter a space as such, but to "inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts" – the "life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons" (2013:28). Fugitivity can be defined as a concept that emerged from the historical background of "black", enslaved or native peoples' attempts to escape or to resist captivity. "It can be seen as both the material and discourse movement of black bodies, minds and souls. It is the ability to recast ourselves as ungendered, and it is a concept that has to do with constantly resisting domination and opposing structures that enforce domination such as the state" (O' Connell Davidson, 2023:4). The concept of fugitivity allows us to reject the confinement to rigid categories such as gender roles and norms, state control, enforced education and racism.

In *Fugitivity and Marronage (2023)*, Julia O' Connell Davidson explores how fugitivity can play a role in opposing oppressive systems, for example as applied to sex work. She argues that sex workers are fugitive figures because they have to operate in fugitive spaces in order to negotiate their autonomy. Rather than being a narrative of victimhood, fugitivity creates some form of resistance because the sex worker can choose when to work and the conditions that they prefer. "Rather than struggling for 'recognition and acknowledgment generated by the system' that relegated 'black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people' to the 'undercommons,' the call is to see beyond that system and its categories 'and to access the places we know lie outside its walls.'" (2023:6). What this means is that fugitivity helps us to critique the fact that queer, poor, black and other underprivileged minority groups are forced to seek legitimacy from state structures and society, including heteropatriarchy. Fugitivity, like opacity, thus allows for the creation of alternative spaces that simultaneously ensure that

individuals do not lose their true sense of being. Fugitivity connects with marronage in that they both focus on acts of resistance and escape through a refusal to be held captive by any dominant structure. Apart from using it as a feminist strategy, fugitivity can also be explored as "black fugitivity" (Sojoyner, 2017) which explicitly opposes oppressive systems in the form of acts of refusal and strategic resistance (2017:514). The concept, here, "is based on the disavowal of and disengagement from the state governed projects that attempt to adjudicate normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and demographic belonging" (2017:516). Black fugitivity thus seeks radical alternatives to the oppression and domination of marginalised groups.

What I want to suggest is that an ontology of movement and opacity can give rise to precisely to the *logic* of fugitivity *and escape.* Andrew Culp clarifies this by saying: "*Putting everything in* is the fugitive gesture of leaving it all behind" but this "means not confusing identity for structural positions" (2022:11). Rather, as he goes on to argue, it is why Glissant defended "unknowability in a colonial context that wields transparency like a scalpel" (12). Perspectivism is thus not the same as colonial exposure. As an ontological strategy, it offers a "model of association and a method for understanding fugitivity (as *marronage* means flight)" (110); thus, it means "first throwing off basic categories, such as 'community'" in favour of more *contingent* associations that sidestep full exposure. Fugitivity is thus an 'unbecoming' before it is a 'becoming' or 'becoming-with'. This would seem to have serious implications for ubuntu which centres the community above all. Before I address this in the conclusion, I link ontology to ecology and ethics in the final section of this chapter.

5.4 Onto-ecologies and (non-)gendered ethics

Like the Amerindian cultures spoken of by Castro, so too the African Susu "acknowledge the intrusion and existence of nature within culture" (Thayer, 1983:123) by admitting that "a person is not born a cultured being" (123) just as a person has to become a person *in full* in ubuntu. Thus, according to the Susu, a "human being must progress from animal impulses and actions to become a person who can rightly be called human"; if they don't, they are considered to have retained "the animal within them" (123). Although this can be read, from one perspective, as a hierarchical ascendance from animal to human, thinking about this more in terms of perspectivism could allow for another view, namely that nature is always part of – and even at the heart of – human culture. From this perspective, ontology is ecological. As noted in Chapter 3, this needs better clarification because feminists have both embraced and raged against analogies between women and nature. Despite this, there are long-held analogies between women and nature, ranging from more nurturing images like 'mother earth', 'earth mothers' and 'natural' or 'wild' women to more violent ones like 'raped earths' (Alaimo, 2000:2).

Also noted in Chapter 3 is that many of these organicist images became replaced with more mechanistic ones as technologies developed, with well-known feminist scholar Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) leading the way in Western feminism, although, as seen clearly in this chapter, it also took place in the Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist movements. These two worldviews bring to light a long-held binary in feminist studies: between woman as nurturers and mothers on the one hand – with African motherism being exemplary – and woman as freed from their domestic obligations and duties on the other. In other words, according to the latter, domesticity is a gendered enclosure because it casts women as synonymous with nature rather than rationality, with nature often used to further bolster "gender, race, class, colonialist, and sexual ideologies", as we see most acutely with racist ideologies that created a "chain of being in which African, Mexican, and Native Americans" were seen to "dwell 'closest' to a debased nature" (Alaimo, 2000:19). However, as Alaimo goes on to argue, in some formulations of gender, it is actually *culture* which "enforces rigid notions of gender, while nature is imagined as a space utterly free from such confining concepts, values, and roles" (16). She contends, accordingly, and with reference to the important black feminist scholar, Hortense Spillers, that if the "domestic is the very root of gender, then nature as a nondomestic – sometimes even antidomestic space – can provide a site for unraveling gender" (16-17). In other words, to *dis*enclose nature from *forced domesticity* as linked to *women*, a new conception of nature "as an undomesticated ground" (2) is needed, by which Alaimo means nature is undomesticated "both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency" (16).

The importance of this, as the Black Studies scholar Katherine McKittrick has argued, is that "practices of subjugation" are not only material and psychical, but also "spatial acts", which means that "the ways in which black women think, write, and negotiate their surroundings are intermingled with place-based critiques, or, respatializations" (2006:xix). This echoes Glissant's "poetics of landscape" which calls attention to the "written and unwritten" – and yet-to-be-written – of "geographic expression" (xxi); that is, it "creates a way to enter into, and challenge, traditional geographic formulations without the familiar tools of maps, charts, official records, and figures" (xxii). However, the link between woman and nature – as *place* – does not necessarily mean "material ownership" but rather "black repossession" through which "ethical *human*-geographies can be recognized and expressed" (xxiii) alongside the nonhuman and more-than-human worlds. This means for McKittrick (2006) a 'respatialised' feminism which is not only "a matter of carving out a place, or a comfortable situatedness, or ownership", though it does include these, but is rather, more fundamentally, about bringing "forth new cartographic processes" (2006:106). This is clear from work like Octavia Butler's,

which brings together “past and present locations, through time-travel, memory, knowledge, and literary production” which “allows us to imagine that black geographies, while certainly material and contextual, can be lived in unusual, unexpected, ways” (2).

In terms of African cartographies that link gender and ecology, Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng’s overview of Asante history is instructive. The Asante are a group of people native to Ghana. They form part of the Akan ethnic group that is one of the largest groups in Ghana. It is a matrilineal society which practised the Queenmothership concept. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng (1995) give a historical account of the spirituality, gender and power in the Asante history. They attest that the Asante universe was suffused with power which was rooted in the Asante cosmology. Individuals could tap into this power as it was made available by *Onyame* (the Supreme Being). This power could be used for good or evil. Because anyone could tap into this power, it therefore had no gender or age delineations. Accordingly, Akyeampong and Obeng question the way male elders managed to coopt women and juniors who were spiritually powerful. According, they ask: “Did contending powers become submerged, ready to erupt in times of crisis? Or did such powers find a place within the state structure? How do we understand the distribution of power between the state and civil society in Asante society?” (1995:484). The point, as Oyewùmí (2005) has argued, is that while any “model of power” that incorporates “spirituality, gender, and age” produces “a relational understanding of power,” it nevertheless may have foundations that are fragile and can therefore be coopted (25).

What is important to note about the Asante village is that it was established by women who gave birth to sons and daughters. The daughters were not cast aside or shunned but played a pivotal role in the village as they continued the matrilineage. When it was time for deforestation in the village the Akan matriclans had a mechanism for absorbing outsiders when labour was needed for clearing the thick forest (1995:489). This shows the relationship between humans and the environment. Humans and non-humans are able to co-exist as we are all interconnected with the ecosystem. This also underscores the relationship between ubuntu and the ecology. And emphasises the notion that ‘a person is a person through other people’. “This highlights the interconnectedness that exists amongst us the living/ non-living, yet to be born and extends to the environment and past and future generations” (Mabele *et al*., 2022: 96). The relation with the non-human nature (the deforestation) also highlights the ethics of care that ubuntu promotes in regard to the environment. This is suggestive of a harmonious relation that can potentially exist between humans and the environment as “ubuntu represents indigenous ethics for salient behaviours and ways of thinking about the relationality between a person and other persons as well as non-human beings” (2022:96).

The needs of humans and non-humans are taken into account as they are in a relationship with each other. The only political office that was open was occupied by a woman who was known as the *Ohemma* (Queen mother) who was the co-ruler with the king in all state affairs (Akyeampong and Obeng, 1995:490). She was a senior female in the royal family who was elected by both male and female senior lineage mates "At the three levels of Asante social organization - family, lineage and state – women were crucial in their roles as biological reproducers and as economic and social producers" (1995:490). This then diminished the political visibility of women; however the women still played a prominent role in the society by performing rituals when Asante troops went to war. The political wealth was therefore shared by both males and female members in the community.

In their paper "Going Back to the Roots: Ubuntu and Just Conservation in Southern Africa", Mabele *et al*. (2022) look at how ubuntu philosophy relates to radical ideas such as convivial conservation in support of socio-ecologically just approaches in Southern Africa. They attest that "ubuntu can help enrich convivial conservation proposals in Southern Africa by establishing long relational ethics of care between human beings and physical nature in which there is an embracing of the relationships between humans and non-humans that are based on the ethics and principles of ubuntu such as interconnectedness, the ethics of care, solidarity and collaboration" (2022:93). Ecology is therefore taken into high regard as it influences ubuntu in several ways, placing a focus on the interconnectedness that exists amongst us with other species in the ecosystem. Ubuntu can therefore be a decolonial framework that helps us to evaluate the conservation practices in which indigenous knowledge is accounted for and is used to promote a harmonious relationship between humans and non-humans. What we see here is thus a socio-ecological configuration. Some ubuntu scholars have argued that such configurations would easily flow from an ubuntu ethics, as the community is understood as a "triad composed of the living, the living-dead (ancestors), and the yet-to-be born" (Mabele *et al*., 2022:96). Nevertheless, as I have been arguing throughout this thesis, no such ethics would be truly just if it does not first address the issue of gender.

In a similar light, Inge Konik believes that indigenous African ethical thought (ubuntu) can be brought into dialogue with materialist ecofeminist ideas (2018:271). Konik defines "materialist ecofeminism as a version of ecological feminism that is based on the assumption that the material condition of life shape power relations, economic and cultural practices, skills and ideas" (2018:271). Both ubuntu and ecofeminism emphasise the interconnectedness and interrelationship between human and non-humans. Konik attests that there can be no separation between humans and the environment because we need to have a holistic understanding of existence and this emphasises how we all are connected. Munamato

Chemhuru has argued accordingly that “African philosophies of communitarian thinking and ubuntu” be reinterpreted through “an African ecofeminist philosophical perspective based on finding non-anthropocentric elements in the two ontological value systems” (2018:3). Although Chemhuru finds an ontological equivalence here between humans and the nonhuman and more-than-human worlds, the argument is further developed in terms of justice rather than ontology, even though it is contrasted to the “hierarchical anthropocentric view of environmental ethical thinking similar to that in Aristotle” (8). Here, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it is my view that Ashaolu’s (2021) linking of motherism to the environment is important for understanding ontology as onto-ecology from which ethics flows. However, while Ashaolu argues that “the extreme care of the earth is ingrained in the commitment that a Motherist must Mother Earth”, this view of earth should be an ‘undomesticated’ one rather than a domesticated one. Additionally, there should be a link to the spiritual to allow for an even more comprehensive understanding of ‘ecology’ to include the ‘spirited bodies’ of ancestors. Ramose has argued relatedly that ‘wholeness’ must be understood as “the *process character* of reality or being” (Ojimba, 2023:102, emphasis added). This means thinking of being not as Being but as continually *becoming.* “The hyphenated ‘be-ing,’ in Ramose’s ubuntu ontology” thus “represents reality as a continuous flow of the stream of existence or as a kind of fluidity in existence (Ojimba, 2023:99; cf. Agada, 2021:9; Janz, 2018:217; 2019). What is important about Ramose’s argument is that his understanding of wholeness brings together nature-culture-spirit.

With that said, I address in the conclusion of this chapter the question of whether ubuntu can allow for a *nonnormative dimension of gender* and thus be a truly inclusive and humane moral framework or not. I also address the role of the community in allowing for such a nonnormative dimension.

5.5 Conclusion

In Chapter 3, I argued that ontology must be linked to ecology because the colonial enclosures of the environment had – and continue to have – detrimental effects on the lives of women in particular, and especially for women from indigenous groups. In her work on decolonisation and Afro-feminism, Sylvia Tamale echoes this sentiment by contending that Afro-feminism must engage “traditional ecofeminist ecologies as one approach to sustainable human livelihoods that will also guarantee environmental health and justice” (2020:34). This link between women – though I would argue for the entire LGBTQI+ community – and ecological health is found also in the work of feminist scholar Stacy Alaimo, Black Studies feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick, and local African philosopher, Mogobe Ramose. As I showed, although there are many analogies between women and nature – some positive and some less so –

Alaimo nevertheless thinks that the link is important. She argues, consequently, and with reference to Hortense Spillers, that if the "domestic is the very root of gender, then nature as a nondomestic – sometimes even antidomestic space – can provide a site for unraveling gender" (2018:16-17). By conceiving of nature "as an undomesticated ground" (2), she thus provides a framework for thinking about the *dis*enclosure of nature from *forced domesticity* as linked to *women*. McKittrick extends this argument by contending that "practices of subjugation" should be understood not only as material and psychical, but also as "spatial acts", which means that "the ways in which black women think, write, and negotiate their surroundings as intermingled with place-based critiques, or, respatializations" (2006:xix).

As seen, this resonates strongly with decolonial scholar Edouard Glissant's "poetics of landscape" – a cartographic process of *maronnage* or fugitivity which, as an unbecoming or unmooring is a strategy of disenclosure, though a disenclosure aimed undoing the structural positions of race and gender, including their manifestations in and through the community. In other words, this disenclosure is ontological in that it denotes an ontology of opacity which suggests not just the "impossibility of epistemological comprehension" (2019: 64), as Benjamin Davis argues, but also the irreducibility of ontology to categories like MAN, WOMAN or HUMAN. This matronage is therefore not an undoing of community per se, but rather of the structural asymmetries that haunt it. Disenclosure should also be understood as two simultaneous movements: that of matronage and that of commoning, with the latter closely linked to Ramose's notion of 'wholeness' as "the *process character* of reality or being" (Ojimba, 2023:102, emphasis added) in which nature-culture-spirit are part of this one whole. From this wholeness, I argued that a perspectival "multinaturalism" or "naturalist multiculturalism" (15) be adopted to allow for the emergence of a world constituting a "society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*" in which the ontological status between human and human (e.g. man and woman, or woman and transwoman) is equal, in the same way as is the ontological status between a cultural society and the environment (Castro and Danowski, 2015:n.p.). However, as I cautioned, this incorporation of perspectivism should not boil down to an affirmation of the "exchangeability of women" (Gama, 2023:586). Instead it should be understood in the spirit of Afro-futurism and Afro-feminism; that is, as an attempt to imagine a world in which Africans play a central role in the ontologies of the world. However, instead of espousing a general and abstract view of personhood, this should move towards a more embedded and embodied understanding of personhood as gendered because only then can affordance be better understood as it relates to gendered personhood.

In summary, I sought, in this thesis, to examine the ways in which ubuntu – whether inadvertently or advertently – acts as a *normalising* normative moral framework and how this

serves to uphold systems, structures, and customs that subordinate women and members of LGBTQI+ communities by curbing their affordances. Over the course of the thesis, I developed the claim that African beliefs, values, and norms – including ubuntu – have been impacted upon by various contingent histories such as colonialism, as shown in the cartographic representations, in such a way as to create hierarchical social structures that position women and LGBTQI+ persons as inferior to those who conform to prevailing heteronormative ideologies. The argument I develop is that it is not good enough for women to simply be incorporated into an ethics of ubuntu if its moral foundations are undergirded by heteropatriarchy. Instead, what is required is finding different methods for challenging and dismantling of the ontological categories of 'man', 'woman', and 'human'. In addition, I hold that a truly decolonial and gender-inclusive ubuntu framework can be attained by turning to the environment as a space in which women have historically and continue to contest the roles, values, places, etc. assigned to them by heteropatriarchal systems. I develop this argument by drawing on various philosophical concepts such as affordance, enclosure, fugivity, African Futurism, motherism and opacity, specifically aiming to show that although ubuntu is not free from external influences that can mar its core values, it *is* intersubjective at its core, so much so that the relational aspect of ubuntu is the most important determinant of a person's identity precisely because it is equal to participating in life itself, thereby creating the conditions of possibility for life – and for the flourishing of life. But, just because ubuntu has in intersubjective *ideal* does not mean that it necessarily values all relations equally *in practice*. This is precisely what I address in this thesis by showing that ubuntu has not as yet brought its ideals and practices into alignment.

5.5.1 Cartographic reflection of Chapter 5

This cartography truly reveals counter-mapping *practices* like commoning, motherism, forms of Afro-relationality, and so on, that have destabilised existing power relations. It also shows the value of cartographic process of *maronnage* or fugitivity which, as I argued, can be seen as strategies of disenclosure which have the power not only to change larger national structural positions of race and gender, but also those related to the policing of gender and sexuality in indigenous cultures, despite ubuntu ideals. Thus, is shows how ubuntu ideals and practices fail to align, as well as how this might be changed,

Please turn to the next page to view the cartographic reflection.

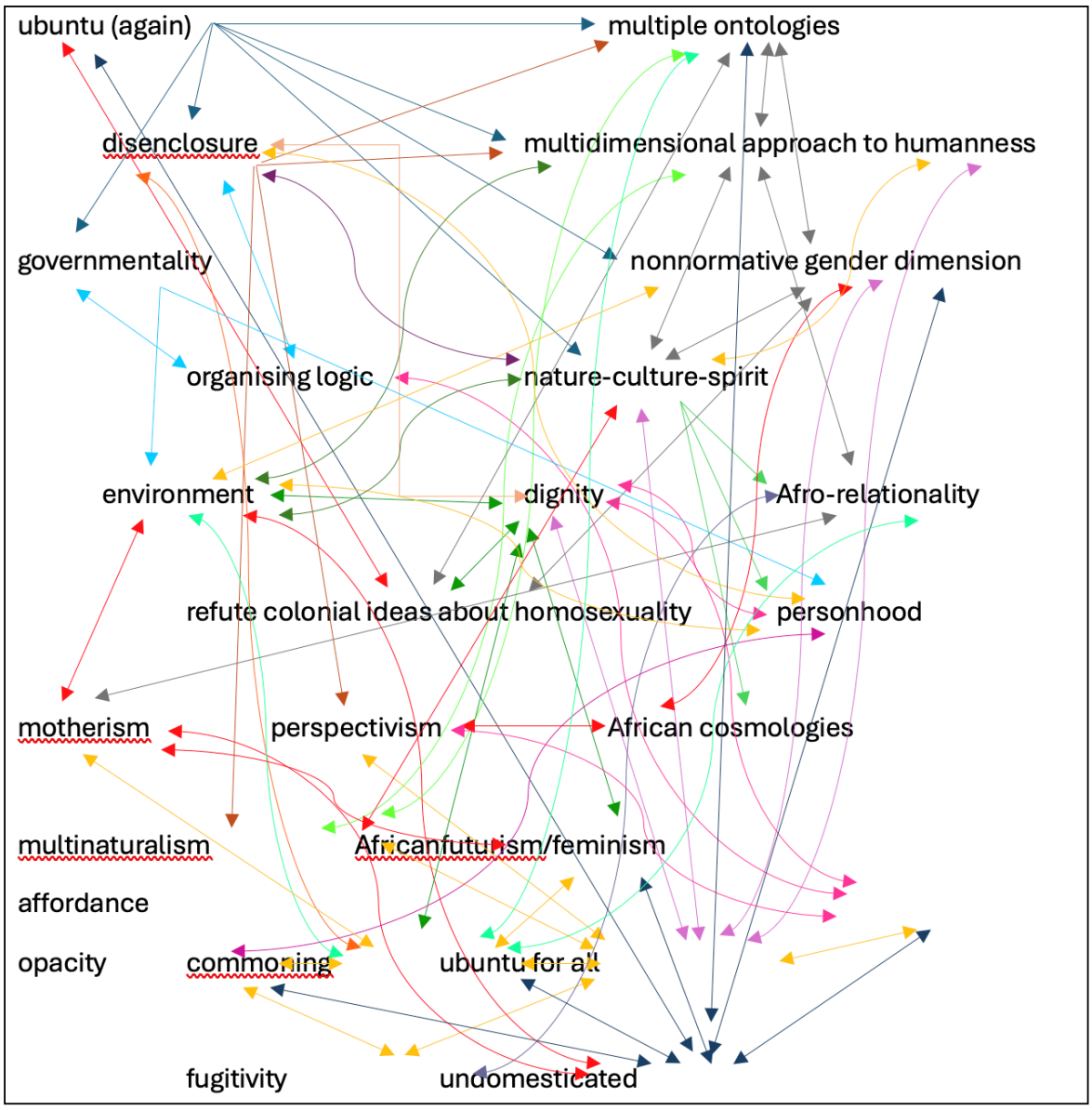

Figure 4: Cartographic reflection of Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Concluding remarks

6.1 Are we any closer to a gender-inclusive ubuntu?

In this thesis, I set out to show that the question of gender has not been sufficiently addressed in ubuntu, despite its ideals. Moreover, I showed that ubuntu is widely regarded in literature to present a uniquely African moral framework and, more to the point, a normative moral framework. Although norms are not necessarily 'bad', they can and do have norming effects because they are intertwined with norming powers. For example, as the gender scholar Adrienne Rich has argued, *compulsory heterosexuality* sheds light on "unexamined heterocentricity" which functions to erase "lesbian existence" – as well as other kinds of feminine existence – while also distorting the "experience of heterosexual women" (2003:11). This is because compulsory heterosexuality operates according to a *logic* of power, which implicitly and explicitly posits heterosexuality as *better* than any other practised form of sexuality. Such organising principles and logics work together with others like hegemonic masculinity and heteropatriarchy and can be said to be forms of *governmentality* in that they are aimed at regulating people's behaviour and thoughts through norming practices "whose power is to produce, demarcate and control bodies to consolidate a heterosexual imperative" (Vilakazi and Mkhize, 2020:1).

In Foucault's original theorisation of governmentality, he argued that it should be understood both as the exercise of power and as a site of 'truth' or knowledge which implies that it can "formulate its truth" along with the ways in which that truth should be practised "as rule and norm" (2008:30). However, as I made clear, governmentality is not aimed at regulating things in themselves, but deals, rather, "with interests, or that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals", such as does the penal system (45). What becomes clear, as I also hoped to have illustrated in the cartographic reflections, is that norms can, over time, become invisibilised and accepted as 'the way things are', which could then have detrimental *ontological* effects. For me, this raises some important questions which I set out to address in this thesis, namely: If ubuntu is not only a moral framework but a *normative* moral framework, what are its gendered assumptions and correlative gendered affordances? In other words, are its gendered assumptions *just* – by which I mean can they be recognised as furthering the sustainable development goals of the UN in terms of gender equality and, thereby, addressing the unjust consequences of gender inequality, such as sexual violence and exploitation – or is it in need of problematisation?

Moreover, how can this be understood in terms of gendered affordance, as discussed above? This subset of questions formed the first set of research questions I addressed.

6.1.1 Norms, affordances and ontology

Gender norms, although widely understood and addressed in the contemporary world, still affect genders differently. This is because many gender norms are still deeply entrenched in gender hierarchies that produce inequalities "that intersect with other social and economic inequalities" and forms of discrimination (WHO, n.d.). This affects who has access to healthcare; how – and if – people are able to express their own gender identities freely; who gets which jobs; and so on. These forms of restriction on decision-making powers, mobility, literacy, the burden of care, and so on, can be philosophically understood in terms of *affordances* and *perceptions* of affordances. For example, a woman might not feel that she can apply for a certain job because she is a woman. This reflects a certain perception she has about her ability to act in the world as an agent. For this reason, affordance should be understood as closely related to a person's capacity to make their life meaningful. I believe that this is most directly related to the notions of *personhood*, *humanness* and *community* as they are practised in ubuntu. My reason for arguing this is that affordances are not shaped by individuals only, but by a community, which takes precedence in ubuntu ontology and also provides *normative* models for the way individual agency should be perceived and enacted.

In ubuntu, as I showed, a conflict exists because despite having ideals worth fighting for, the patriarchal biases of ubuntu pose challenges for African women as well as gender non-conforming people more generally. I argued, therefore, that the communal aspect of ubuntu is in need of problematisation, especially given the prevalence of notions that homosexuality is unAfrican and ungodly which has not escaped ubuntu. But to better understand this, I also argued that there is a longer history at play. Specifically, I referred here to the *logic of enclosure* with reference to the witch hunts (gender) and colonialism (race) to point out the double enclosure of African women. With reference to Sylvia Federici's work, I showed how land enclosures in Europe affected in particular poor peasant women. During the witch hunts, women were terrorised and tortured and, if found guilty, executed in public. This left women vulnerable to their exploiters and stripped them of the most important thing they owned, namely their right to dignity. In addition, as Federici argues, it also made women more submissive to the orthodox structures that were created by capitalism. She argues accordingly that the witch hunts were "a war against women" and constituted a "concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power" (2004:186). In fact, at least three things were at play: patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental violence. For this reason, I argued that the 'gender question' should also be understood as being intertwined with the

‘land question’. In other words, enclosure was not only a means of “dispossessing commoners of their rights of access and entitlement” (Magnani and Marchini, 2002:2), but also entailed “an ontological reconfiguration of the world” (Shaw, 2017:889).

The link between the ‘gender question’ and the ‘land question’ is justified by the many analogies between women and nature, which include notions such as ‘mother earth’ and ‘earth mothers’; as well as ‘wild women’ – women who run with wolves – as opposed to tame or enslaved women; not to mention “fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands” and “raped earths” (Alaimo, 2000:2). In other words, to justify the enclosure of the commons and the later colonial quests which resulted in the annexation of lands, gendered and racial enclosures had to be enacted so that women could be made ontologically equivalent to nature, just as black women and men had to be made equivalent to animals, thus casting all of these bodies “outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency” (Alaimo, 2000:2). As the land and animals had to be tamed and domesticated, so did gendered and racialised bodies. However, this also provides me with some grounds for strategising *commoning* as an undomesticated ecological practice and decolonial move aimed at expressing human solidarity and producing communal health – physical, psychical and spiritual.

In *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Achille Mbembe links race and racialisation to the logic of enclosure, arguing that they became a constitutive foundation of knowledge; that is, Blackness became a site of knowledge – and these sites of knowledge, as Kathy Ferguson has argued, enable and disable the “questions we can ask about the world” because when we are “busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it” (1995:7). Race, like gender, thus became “more or less a coded way of dividing or organising a multiplicity, of fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, of allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a *logic of enclosure*” (Mbembe, 2017:5). These strategies were further reinforced through the “triple mechanism of capture, removal, and objectification” so that the ‘slave’ – another ‘nickname’ – was “forcibly locked within a system that prevented him [or her] from freely making of his [or her] life" (2017:47). These forms of dispossession are not only material, but ontological, as I argued throughout this thesis and as the cartographic reflections reveal in terms of a layeredness that is not always readily seen. This is because part of the problem is the way in which social constructions and ideologies like ‘race’ and ‘gender’ become naturalised even though they are reliant on “persistent and systematic distortions in collective cultural resources that function to perpetuate oppressive forms of life, the existence of which is at least partly explained by this function” (Jenkins, 2023:49). The reason for these persistent and systematic distortions is to render them *structural* so that they appear as if they are “natural and

appropriate" (49). This has an immediate effect on affordances and perceived affordances in an environment or ecology.

This raised a number of new but related questions for me. If race and gender became used as instruments of enclosure at specific times in history and in specific places – such as the European enclosures of the commons and the witch hunts, as well as colonialism – does it mean that we can access other ways of looking at these? More to the point, I began to wonder what historical studies of conceptions of gender in precolonial Africa could do to call into question ideas of patriarchy and heterosexuality as 'African' and 'godly'. To begin answering this, I turned to numerous studies on gender in Africa, finding that many West African societies were organised according to kinship or group relations, that is, *community*, rather than gender relations. I also found that sex and gender were not necessarily tied together to form strict binary categories with specific affordances. Instead, many African societies understood gender and gender relations to be more fluid. This can be seen from the existence of a 'third gender' in Inuit societies and among Native North Americans, as well as in the androgenous expression of gender found in pre-Columbian America. In Africa, as Ifi Amadiume argues through historical work in her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (2005), gender was conceived fluidly in the Nnobi and Igbo societies, which meant that daughters could become 'male daughters', a phenomenon which "arose as a result of the coexistence of principles of individual and collective ownership of land" (32). It was therefore neither unusual nor irregular for Igbo daughters, for example, to become 'sons' – or then male daughters – in the sense that they took the lineage position of a son in order to have the power to control property. Neither was it uncommon for women to occupy the role of a husband – a female husband in this case – so that a widowed women could be married for economic and social reasons, even though these married women (supposedly) did not have intercourse. For Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, the strong focus on the binary and racial differentiation of bodies came along when, as with the colonial conquests and the witch hunts, skin colour and genitals were used to enforce a new *regime* of 'seeing', by which she means it invited "a gaze, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation" (2005:3). And this 'seeing' differentiation is precisely what allowed race and gender to become sites of knowledge – organising logics of governmentality.

Once again, this brought me back to the issue of ontology, community and affordance because, as Lucy Nicholas argues, in order for a truly co-constitutive ontological position to exist, the "relationship between self, others and situation, and the picture of agency it paints, is best characterised as *situated capacity*" which is itself premised on *situated affordances* (2014:93). In particular, I was interested in whether or not ubuntu could accommodate such ambiguity of gender as just described. This led me to formulate a third set of questions,

namely: Can ubuntu, as a normative moral framework, accommodate a *non-normative* gender dimension? And if so, what would a more explicitly gender-inclusive conception of ubuntu look like theoretically and allow for practically? This is a difficult question because it touches on identity and representation or, more pertinently, allows for some kind of undoing of these. The reason that it is difficult in the African context is that Africans, African women, and African LGBTQI+ persons, have had to fight politically for many years to be *recognised in their identities* rather than the identities bestowed upon them by colonisers. Additionally, these identities are closely tied to a whole array of symbolisms stemming from cultural traditions and norms, as well as rituals, myths, dance, and so on. Ubuntu falls within this symbolic order because although ubuntu is a moral framework guiding action, it is also used symbolically to represent African values. Allowing for a nonnormative gender dimension would thus seem to invite all kinds of trouble because it invites questions like what it means to be nonnormative and what it means in an African context to refuse to conform to standard (heterosexual and heteropatriarchal) expressions of gender and sexuality. It also calls for a radical depathologisation of homosexual identities and an acceptance of fluidity – an unsettling position!

With these three sets of questions in hand, I began to formulate some ideas about what a truly gender-inclusive ubuntu would look like. Below I summarise some of the main points I made throughout the thesis.

6.2 Notes for a gender-inclusive ubuntu

As I have said numerous times, rather than putting forward a moral view of ubuntu, my view is that the problem lies at the ontological level. To address this, I argued that ubuntu ontology should be *plural* – a lesson that can be learnt from trans studies, which highlight the cost at which the binary sexed body is produced and upheld as 'normal' when in fact bodies are always-already part of a plurality, a "complex amalgamation of gland secretions and reproductive organs, chromosomes and genes, morphological characteristics and physiognomic features" (Stryker, 2007:62). In other words, what I deem necessary is that ubuntu establish a new axis of ontological plurality that can account for many different, fluid and not-yet imagined expressions of gender. This would mean understanding the relationship between the individual and the community not only in terms of actualised practices, but also in terms of a more cosmological or ontological perspective.

With reference to the Martinican writer, poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant, I argued that 'fluidity' be extended to 'opacity'; that is, the right *not* to be transparent or overexposed. What is interesting about Glissant's argument, however, is that even though he argues for a right to

opacity, he also places emphasis on *relationality* and the interconnectedness that exists between individuals and their community; between humans and the nonhuman or more-than-human world; between rationality, sensation and spirituality. This is why I suggest that an ontology of opacity can escape the logics of enclosure – precisely because it is guided by a *logic* of *fugitivity* and *escape.* As an ontological strategy, opacity is thus an 'unbecoming' before it is a 'becoming' or 'becoming-with'. That is, it presents a cartographic process of *maronnage* or counter-mapping – a strategy of disenclosure aimed at undoing the *structural* positions of race and gender, including their manifestations in and through the community. Counter-mapping is important because it presents a decolonial strategy for undoing narratives tied to hegemonic colonial truths, and thus also dismantling colonial power distributions. Opacity, fugitivity and counter-mapping are thus the first set of identified strategies for addressing gender at an ontological level. What this allows for is ontological *commoning* – a multidimensional and perspectival *process ontology* capable of incorporating the entirety of life, including human life in all its expressions, such as its gendered expressions. From this emerges an understanding of 'wholeness'; that is, a world constituting a "society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*" in which the ontological status between human and human (e.g. man and woman, or woman and transwoman) is equal, in the same way as is the ontological status between a cultural society and the environment (Castro and Danowski, 2015:n.p.).

Commoning, at an ontological level, thus allows for the conception of onto-ecologies, as we learn from the indigenous Ngarrindjeri who also bring together ontology and ecology through their "statement of authority in a *Yannarumi* (Speaking as Country) Deed," through which they argue that the *Yannarumi* "conveys a Ngarrindjeri philosophy in which being is expressed (or 'spoken') through processes of ecological connectivity" (Bignall *et al*., 2016:469); that is, in terms of an "ontology of Being as 'more-than-human'" (470). What this means is that the Ngarrindjeri understand their own being as "inseparable from the lands and waters that define their existence", so that their experience of the "wellness or ill-health of the environment" is taken to be an aspect of their "cultural health as an Indigenous Nation" (469). The point is that their ontology has an "ecological character" that is in line with the creation of "axiological concepts for the evaluation of activities affecting the health of Country and its interconnected life forms" (470). Along with opacity, fugitivity and counter-mapping, I thus argue for a further strategy of commoning to include the nonhuman and more-than-human world in ubuntu ontology *practices,* as this is already present in its cosmology. My reason for this is that the enclosure of common lands was accompanied by the enclosing violences of race and gender when they became *structural* means of governmentality.

Here, I contend that motherism can be of use. I justified this with reference to the work of Ashaolu (2021:2) for whom motherism not only denotes childbearing and childrearing, but also points to the important roles played by women in the traditional peaceful management of the environment and indigenous knowledge. Ashaolu's linking of motherism to the environment is significant because it shows the importance of an onto-eco-ethical view. This impetus is also found in Africanfuturism, as demonstrated in the science fiction literature of Nnedi Okorafor, such as her short story "Mother of Invention" (2018) and the novel *Binti* (2015) (Oku, 2021:75). What is striking about Africanfuturism is that women are often portrayed as ontologically equal to men, even in technological spheres, although there is a concurrent focus on African traditions and spiritual beliefs, as well as strong ecofeminist undertones, which operate from "the premise that women are largely responsible for harnessing the earth's resources to nurture their families through domestic food production, and therefore must guard jealously this earth-wealth" as Wangari Maathai has done with her Greenbelt Movement (Oku, 2021:84). Besides motherism and Africanfuturism, Afro-feminism presents strategies for yoking gender ontologies, environmental health and justice. It would seem then, that many African societies and theorists have understood ecological health as deeply and ontologically linked to human health. This reorientation to African and other indigenous knowledges can assist in the creation of normative standards of being – *all of being* – as based on the ubuntu maxim 'I am because we are' rather than the Western notion of 'I think therefore I am' (Tamale, 2020: 231). This became most clear in the final cartographic reflection at the end of Chapter 5.

In terms of African cartographies that link gender and ecology, Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng's overview of Asante history is instructive. As I showed, the Asante, native to Ghana, are a matrilineal society that practises queen mothership. The Asante universe was understood to be suffused with cosmological power which individuals could tap into and which was made available by *Onyame* (the Supreme Being). However, this power could be used for good or evil and was thus constructed as part of a model of being, which incorporated power, spirituality, gender and age, so that a *relational* understanding of power was emphasised. This included the relationship between humans and the environment. Humans and non-humans were thus able to co-exist as all beings were understood to be interconnected with the ecosystem. Relatedly, Mabele *et al*. (2022) argue that ubuntu philosophy incorporates radical ideas such as convivial conservation. They attest that "ubuntu can help enrich convivial conservation proposals in Southern Africa by establishing long relational ethics of care between human beings and physical nature in which there is an embracing of the relationships between humans and non-humans that are based on the ethics and principles of ubuntu such as interconnectedness, the ethics of care, solidarity and collaboration" (2022:93). However,

as I have argued, before these relations can be addressed ethically, they must be understood ontologically.

In summary then, in this thesis I set out to investigate the 'gender question' in relation to ubuntu, which has been said to offer a uniquely African – and thus decolonial – moral framework. The question of gender is important, not only because gender equality has long been fought for, but also because even the United Nations sees it as important for achieving a future that is inclusive of all, rather than just some. The 'gender question' thus has a dual function in this study: 1) to broaden the notion of the 'woman question' aimed primarily at equality between men and women to include all genders; and 2) to indicate the questions raised about gender as they related to ubuntu.

My reason for undertaking this project was that even though ubuntu has been met with much positivity, having been variously linked to issues of liberation, development and identity, it has also been criticised for being vague, pre-scientific and irrelevant for modern society, for being an elitist creation, and for being deeply implicated in practices of patriarchy and heteronormativity – norms that impose a *logic* according to which heterosexuality is posited implicitly and explicitly as *better*, just as the primacy of manhood is. Thus, even though ubuntu ethics is reflecting in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*, roughly translated as "I am what I am because of who we are", it would appear that the 'we' is more inclusive of some than others. This raises an important question: If ubuntu is not only a moral framework but also a *normative* moral framework, what are its gendered assumptions and correlative gendered affordances? In other words, are its gendered assumptions *just* or are they in need of problematisation?

To address this question, I looked at studies on *affordance* and the perception of affordance, or the set of possibilities for action available to agents in their environments, as well as *governmentality*, to show how gendered race and racialised gender became *sites of knowledge* that themselves functioned as organising principles and logics whose power was to produce, demarcate and control bodies in specific ways. What became clear is that gender is not a stable category of identity and has been understood and practised in many different ways throughout the course of history. In precolonial Africa, many societies had more fluid conceptions thereof, which is important because it goes to show that contemporary understandings of homosexuality as unAfrican and ungodly are unjustified. Changing such perceptions can go a long way to addressing gender-based violence, for example.

Important for the purposes of this study was my argument that change cannot occur epistemologically or ethically without ontology being addressed. My contention was thus that

when gender norms are practised in certain ways, they become embedded in ontologies of gender over time, thus making certain gender roles and expressions seem more ‘normal’ than others. Rather than simply working towards including more genders into a patriarchal framework, I aimed to destabilise the framework at an ontological level by asking how non-normative sexual practices and gender expressions call into question the stability of gender. My aim was thus to see if, or how, ubuntu – as a normative moral framework – could accommodate a *non-normative* gender dimension. To do so, I employed a counter-mapping approach with reference to opacity, fugitivity, Africanfuturism, Afro-feminism, motherism and commoning.

The main contribution of this thesis, however, is my yoking of ontology to ecology in order to posit the importance of an onto-ecological view in which human and human, as well as human and nature, are brought together in the wholeness of ubuntu. Such understandings of wholeness are, as I have shown, an important part of much indigenous knowledges of the Global South generally and Africa specifically. In short, my argument is that for ubuntu to be a truly just decolonial moral framework, it must understand ontology more broadly to include all genders as well as the nonhuman and more-than-human worlds, which includes the world of ancestors. Only then can a truly just ethics emerge.

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