



# Transformative Narratives: Fostering Ubuntu-Inspired Participatory Design Practices

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## ABSTRACT

Emerging within the diverse tapestry of African wisdom and knowledge, Ubuntu, a philosophy of shared humanity and interconnectedness, offers exciting pathways for transforming participatory design (PD) practices in the Global South. Beyond a mere call for inclusion, Ubuntu inspires decolonial approaches and has the potential for sustainable innovation in design that resonates with local contexts. While communal and indigenous philosophies have increasingly guided decolonial PD efforts, particularly in the Global South, Ubuntu presents a unique lens for embracing both practical methods and a shift towards interconnectedness as a design ethos. This exploratory paper proposes concrete Ubuntu-guided PD techniques, leveraging storytelling and shared narratives, to cultivate a deep sense of interconnectedness within PD research. By amplifying these modes of engagement, we pave the way for alternative, “otherwise” knowledge production and participatory approaches, and future explorations of other indigenous and decolonial philosophies in PD research.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**; *Contextual design*.

## KEYWORDS

participatory design, Ubuntu philosophy, storytelling, decolonial design, pluriversal design.

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You know when Ubuntu is there, and it is obvious when it is absent. It has to do with what it means to be truly human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life.

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Participatory design (PD) was first formally conceptualised as part of a move to transform Scandinavian work practices in the 1970s. But its history goes much further into the past depending on how one defines participatory design. Udoewa [82] argues that PD predates homo sapiens, who sharpened stones that later became stone axes before evolving into cutting blades, chisels and celts [66, 82]. Or it can be traced to ancient Greece, where midwives and animal herders collaborated to investigate birth control techniques using herbs [70]. While definitions for PD are plentiful, it is understood and practised in interactions and collaborations with communities during the design process, often leading to mutual learning [87]. Recognising our complex histories and definitions is important to understanding PD and alternative epistemological foundations. As modern PD has evolved and expanded its global reach, we as designers and researchers have been grappling with what it means to conduct PD research with communities in the Global South from our positions as researchers mostly informed by Western and modern subjectivities and what a decolonial PD approach looks like [4]. How our local epistemologies and ontologies exist within PD research, which has continuously sparked important and transforming work moving the field to interesting and important spaces [75, 76, 85, 89].

Part of acknowledging and embracing alternative modes of being in the work of PD has been increased decolonial theorising and practice, a movement becoming more prominent in PD research [2, 5, 7, 45, 75, 80]. And while there has been work done on theories and methods originating from the Global South, research is scant on how African philosophies can be leveraged in PD practice [11, 88]. One such ontology and African humanist philosophy is Ubuntu, which is rooted in a tradition of communality and interconnectedness, a way of seeing and being beyond the self and a dominant philosophy across many communities in Southern Africa [32]. Ubuntu as a philosophical practice grew in prominence within many rural African communities as a means of sharing basic resources, establishing symbiotic relationships, and respecting the lives and humanity of others [67]. As such the elements of humanity, connectedness, and community are believed to be integral in creating healthy and thriving communities with Ubuntu as an underpinning ontological foundation. One of the ways in which Ubuntu is continuously realised and examined by communities is through the tradition of storytelling and oral knowledge creation and retention, as opposed to the written form dominant in Western epistemes [13, 32]. This usually involves collective involvement and diverse perspectives from all who participate, and acknowledges a mode of engagement communities are comfortable and familiar with. As such, the acknowledgement and inclusion of communities

who embrace oral traditions have been in conflict with mainstream, academic, and institutional knowledge creation and research rigour, which can include alienating practices [12, 49].

A result of neglecting participants' active involvement and collaboration is the creation of modes of engagement and content that maintain paternalistic and top-down researcher-collaborator relationships. A potential antidote to such hierarchical practices of innovation and development, and in some cases PD research, is the embracing of Ubuntu as an ontological position and storytelling as a dominant tool for engagement [39, 49, 56, 69]. These place the storyteller at the forefront of the intervention's design and acknowledge an interconnected reality for everyone involved. This concept of interconnectedness can be extended to non-human entities without boundaries [57], such as with the philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, which has origins amongst some Andean indigenous groups of South America [5, 31]. There is thus a question of how we, as PD researchers, acknowledge the complexity of community and move from aspirations of communal ideas towards design practices that espouse them. And thus providing avenues for reconsidering how we define community and what we can learn from philosophies, such as Ubuntu, which embrace connectedness and humanity at its core. Drawing from African Studies literature on Ubuntu and storytelling, critical HCI literature rooted in feminist, intersectionality, and decolonial theory, as well as previous research conducted with a South African community, this exploratory paper proposes a potential avenue for decolonial PD research that is Ubuntu-centric. Building on what Udoewa proposes as "Radical Participatory Design" [82, 83], that encourages ways in which we can be and do "otherwise" [3, 78, 79].

## 2 UBUNTU AND PARTICIPATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR DECOLONIAL PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In this section, I detail some of the Human-Computer Interaction research from which an Ubuntu-centric approach to PD can lean on, as well as how Ubuntu can accommodate notions of participation and storytelling practices to inform inclusive and creative modes of engagement that centre community narratives.

### 2.1 The Trajectory of Human-Computer Interaction: Feminist HCI, Intersectional HCI, and Decolonial Computing

Ubuntu has the potential of joining a diverse and disruptive group of approaches and concepts that consider more inclusive ways of design and research. In the field of Human-Computer Interaction, this manifests in various ways as emerging critical frameworks, such as Feminist and Intersectional HCI [9, 24, 42, 73], and Decolonial Computing [6, 23, 38, 43, 63], are challenging traditional, and often monolithic, approaches to design. This is important because of the prevailing notion that HCI is neutral and colourblind when, in fact, it has historically contained elements of colonialism and other oppressive systems [29]. Considering these critical perspectives, researchers have begun moving beyond tokenistic inclusion and fostering truly transformative design processes [17, 81]. These

approaches resonate with the core values of Ubuntu – shared humanity, communal well-being, and collective responsibility.

**2.1.1 Feminist HCI.** Historically, HCI has revolved around the concept of a singular "user," often failing to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and power dynamics that shape technology interactions. Feminist HCI, as introduced by Bardzell [9], critiques this limited perspective, highlighting how it overlooks and potentially disempowers marginalized communities, especially regarding gender. Feminist HCI is also concerned with the centring of diverse and historically marginalised voices in an effort to highlight diverse experiences and inform nuanced understandings of the needs of "users" while challenging traditional design paradigms [8]. This aligns perfectly with Ubuntu's core tenet, recognising the interdependence of people and communities, emphasizing shared humanity and collective responsibility. Feminist HCI, as informed by a rich history of feminist scholarship [15, 33, 72] is also deeply committed to reflexivity. As an example, in an attempt to generate methods of reflexive research and combat the oppressive underpinnings in HCI and other research practically, Burtscher and Spiel [14] provide a gender-sensitive approach to HCI practice and research. This approach includes: respecting privacy and creating a "non-judgemental safe environment" of and for participants; acknowledging diversity of bodies and expressions during engagements; and respecting self-identification of participants regarding gender, race, and sexual orientation, to name a few. An Ubuntu-centric approach should thus be in harmony with Feminist HCI while also enhancing new ways of conducting inclusionary and decolonial PD research.

**2.1.2 Intersectional HCI.** Intersectionality, a theoretical framework with its roots in the experiences of Black, Latina, and Native women in the United States [18, 34], resulting in the term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw [21, 22], is "a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences" [35]. Its framing considers the relationship between people, their communities, and objects in a pluralistic, interconnected way. As a result it has been leveraged in HCI research, especially when working with marginalised groups challenging hegemonic structures. As Kumar, Karusala, Ismail, and Tuli [42, p. 22] write, "An intersectional lens is not optional; it must undergird any methodology that we use."

**2.1.3 Decolonial Computing.** Decolonial Computing, supported by postcolonial and critical theory, can be seen as a critical response to historical practices of HCI and computing research [38, 43, 64]. In recent years this domain has transformed into a larger movement within HCI and PD, culminating in a decolonial manifesto for HCI research and design [5], leveraging memory as decolonial praxis in African HCI design [2, 16], and re-envisioning digital mental health through a critical decolonial lens [63]. This resonates with Ubuntu's commitment to self-determination and collective empowerment. By incorporating decolonial principles, PD research can create spaces for communities to actively participate in shaping technologies that serve their needs and aspirations. For instance, using Indigenous storytelling methods to gather community knowledge and co-create culturally relevant educational technologies [65] aligns with Ubuntu's emphasis on valuing local wisdom and empowering

communities to become active agents in shaping their technological futures.

## 2.2 Community: What it Means and How it Manifests.

Community is a complex and challenging concept to explain and define due to its multiplicity of manifestations. One could, for instance, define community by geographical location, large or small. Or one could define it by shared attitudes or interests. I choose to lean on the work of Nira Yuval-Davis and bell hooks to define community. Community is to belong, and to belong is to feel at "home" [36, 37]. Where home is not necessarily the "domestic(ated) material spaces" we occupy, but rather familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment [90]. I also draw from the work of Lynn Hankinson Nelson [58, 59] and Heidi Grasswick [30] who think through not only community, but also *individuals-in-community*. Individuals-in-community are situated, they are intertwined ontologically with their surroundings, and they are interactive instead of self-sufficient [30, 62]. As such, I consider the individual-in-community and community as co-existing, a system that ebbs and flows with a sense of shared trajectories and questions to be answered together.

## 2.3 Ubuntu and Participation

Understandings of Ubuntu, since an accurate definition remains challenging to articulate in English, is often drawn from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's (1999) conceptualisation of this philosophy as, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours", or in the isiZulu maxim,

*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*

roughly translated as, "A person is a person through other persons." The interpretation of these definitions is as complex and varied as the communities that embrace them. It is a powerful philosophy whose characteristics include, inter alia, connectedness, communalism, justice, harmony, and propriety [10, 32]. Communities are inherently attempting to acknowledge the evolving relationship between community members and the community at large, especially as it pertains to enhancing their collective humanity. The emphasis on community and humanity here is essential, as some critiques of communal mindsets include how communities are capable of harmful conduct despite individual ethics [50, 55]. The focus on humanity and connectedness beyond specific group identities is an important factor within an onto-epistemic understanding of Ubuntu. Expounding on Ubuntu can be challenging because it is both an intrinsic concept and a philosophy derived from external action. As such, it can manifest in innumerable ways, but its core remains its reliance on the subversion of individualism and the embracing of community [46].

One of the notable implications of Ubuntu as philosophical practice is allowing pathways for individuals to value their identity through their relationship with their community and exterior world [48]. A reciprocity that counters the Cartesian and Western notion, "I think, therefore I am." Instead, this is replaced with, "I participate, therefore I am" [74]. Ubuntu is thus a philosophy premised on participation in the lives of others and participation in the world, and its emphasis on the values of humanity has the potential for universality, transcending time and cultures. It is, in fact, this transcendent

quality that has made it a popular approach for philosophical enquiry, but it has not been explored as much in the fields of design, or specifically participatory design, in which it has the potential to garner novel and interesting insights.

That said, Ubuntu has not come without its detractors and critiques, making it challenging to embrace holistically in research. As communities in society, we are not immune to the influences of Western individualism and capitalist values [51]. Ubuntu can also not avoid the political agendas of the elite and, as such, can be, and has been, abused nefariously as a driver for nation-building, as argued by Matolino and Kwindingwi [51]. This argument that adopting an Ubuntu philosophy is the cause of authoritative malfeasance has been contested by Metz [54], who, in fact, sees the misappropriation of Ubuntu philosophy as an opportunity to reinvigorate and reconfigure our application and understanding of Ubuntu, specifically in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. As an example of how this can be achieved, Cornell and van Marle [19] propose what they term Ubuntu feminism as a counter to many of the shortfalls of Western feminism, mostly concerning individual autonomy and politics of care. They acknowledge the significance of Ubuntu as a desirable critical standpoint from which to view humanity and how it can be leveraged to "refuse the demands of patriarchy" [19, p. 1]. Ubuntu is thus a useful lens with which to consider participation and community, as well as to reconsider how we engage with one another and our environment, not only in participatory research but also in all relational acts.

## 2.4 Ubuntu and Storytelling

As a philosophical framing, Ubuntu is not new to PD research, though it is underexplored as a lens through which we conduct research. Winschiers-Theophilus et al. [88] reflect on PD practices in the context of rural Southern African communities and leverage local epistemologies to re-examine PD and work towards methodological implications for cross-cultural design. They allude to storytelling as a feature of traditional rural African communities and write in support of appreciating "storytelling in a way that does not implicitly impoverish the voice of the 'other'" [88, p. 3]. What such a practice might look like is uncertain, but this work is a recognition that one needs to consider the alternative knowledge creation and retention practices beyond what one considers mainstream and formally acceptable and valuing local ways of being as integral to one's own.

Storytelling has been a tool used in user-centred design (UCD) to ascertain and understand usability requirements [39, 56, 69]. This form of narrative inquiry in UCD is one that centres the objectives of a project above the complexity of people's holistic lived experiences with the aim of operationalising storytelling in the work of designers [1]. What storytelling can achieve for both collaborator and designer is a connection beyond project goals [56]. It is the potential intersection of the lives of all collaborators, where we can sit and digest what it means to be in our respective communities. Moreover, when storytelling is prioritised with the philosophical underpinnings of Ubuntu, it can open up conversations and avenues for exploration that consider the myriad of ways of participating beyond human-to-human engagement [56, 71]. One in which we

subvert traditional tools and techniques and innovate on the community's own terms.

### 3 PUTTING UBUNTU INTO PRACTICE: DESIGNING WITH AND FOR COMMUNALITY

I would like to reference two ways in which an Ubuntu-guided practice can enrich PD research with a specific emphasis on decolonial thinking and connectedness through storytelling. These serve as examples of how we can diversify our way of collaborating with communities and disrupt and expand traditional forms of knowledge. The engagements were part of a research project with community collaborators from the village of Ga-Dikgale in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The project concerned co-designing digital interventions for wellbeing. Community collaborators included parents, grandparents, health workers and other caregivers. Methods included informal conversations [77] over a period of two weeks with 20 community collaborators in the community spaces they preferred, including the community hall, under the tree outside their local clinic, and within the spaces they have group activities. Working towards embracing the values of Ubuntu and PD, these methods not only promoted comfortable and free engagement and collaboration but also established from the beginning the importance of what community collaborators consider a priority. Allowing for open conversations and pathways for exploration.

#### 3.1 Relations Beyond Human-to-Human

During engagements with community members working towards a project focusing on maternal and child wellbeing, I engaged in informal conversations with collaborators as part of my exploratory work. Besides the introduction of the problem space for the project, I made an effort to fully understand the broader experiences of living within the community and how community members would like to work towards addressing challenges. Some of the key moments during these conversations, where the Ubuntu onto-epistemology manifested, was the acknowledgement of the community's relationship with the earth, human and non-human. In one instance, a community elder pointed out a window towards a small koppie (hill) and referred to it by name, detailing the history of its nomenclature and its importance in the existence of the village and the heritage of the community. They spoke of the road that led up to the community hall where we were located and the pathways now covered by modern housing. The landscapes and people that walked them, integral to understanding what it is to be of and in the community. Community members went further to elaborate on the importance of knowing these histories, ones that are not written in textbooks or visible on video. At first observation, this could be construed to have very little to do with maternal and child well-being, but as community members elaborated, it was clear that the community's well-being is intrinsically linked to their relationship with the earth. Their humanity and existence dependent on this relation. This represents a manifestation of decolonial PD and Ubuntu in practice and informs ways to invite such relations to be at the forefront of our engagements. A consideration of entities outside of ourselves is deeply connected to more-than-human

design [3, 28], which has become more relevant with the climate crises becoming increasingly concerning. Specifically, this way of exploring the multifaceted lives and experiences of collaborators draws from Akama, Light, and Kamahira's "always-participating-with-many" concept in PD, especially "embracing non-living forms with ontologies" [3, p. 2].

#### 3.2 Participating Beyond the "I"

The second example, during the same project, highlights how the community members we engage with during PD projects are not the only ones who are present during engagements. While PD research does acknowledge this, that participating collaborators do not fully represent the rest of the community, there are other ways in which presence is not the only way one can participate. In this case it was not about representation and presence but rather about viewing participation beyond the individual, the self. When conversing on well-being challenges as well as potential solutions for addressing them, collaborators often did not consider themselves in isolation. Even if challenges were irrelevant to them, they would mention a neighbour, family member, or friend for whom it would be appropriate. An intervention would be scrutinised based on their community's challenges, such as technological literacy, visual impairments, and other accessibility concerns. The point being that while they admit to not speaking for everyone in the community, they identify that they are in the PD space in connection with those who are not. This is an important ontological extension of the self, an ontological heterogeneity, and as per the previous example, indicates the connectedness of community beyond the real-time participation during engagements. This connection does not only exist with living relations but also those relations communities have lost, including the interactions with ancestors and the surrounding land. As decolonial theorist Achille Mbembe writes, "In African tradition, human beings were never satisfied simply being human beings, they are constantly in search of a supplement to other humanhoods. Often, they added to the humanhood various attributes of the properties taken from the world of animals, plants, and various objects" [53, p. 218]. How we as living humans and ancestors are connected to the elements and land speaks to the "beyond human" relations mentioned previously. One cannot ignore the significance of viewing the world through a pluralistic lens such as this.

Not only does an Ubuntu-centric mindset guide the thinking represented by these two examples, but it also alludes to what Escobar terms the pluriverse [27]. "It entails a vision where the earth is a whole living being always emerging, encouraging the discovery and the imagination of different forms of planetarization in which human beings, along with other beings, can coexist enriching each other" [68, p. 4][26]. Achieving pluriversal thinking and design is done through our multifaceted relations and the creation of knowledge within those relations. Ubuntu and pluriversal thinking is thus an alternative to human-centred, community-centred, or planet-centred design since it removes the centre and prioritisation of a domain, human or non-human. A way in which the community can embrace the pluriverse and Ubuntu is consequently through

storytelling. Embracing storytelling more deliberately has the potential to illuminate community priorities and interests beyond a particular framing or understanding of a design challenge.

### 3.3 The Story as Catalyst for Ubuntu-centric PD

The engagements described above arose from a dialogic approach that did not centre a focal point of inquiry. It embraced the multiple realities that exist in communities, offering pathways for the emergence of narratives that illuminate potentialities for PD work. It was important for me to begin with this in mind. While an overview of the exploratory research was communicated, this was not stressed as a boundary, and what I found was that the stories people wanted to tell, the experiences they wished to share, are those that they value and see as important and so I should, necessarily, too. While oral storytelling, in the style of face-to-face engagement, remains largely practised by older community members, there are ways in which similar practices manifest among younger groups, often leveraging digital technologies. The use of short-form videos and audio clips, images and radio have exhibited the possibilities of digital storytelling to embrace Ubuntu's pluriversal qualities in the digital age. The ways in which we engage and understand the "daily living" of our collaborator communities are vital towards expanding HCI research and innovation within rural and under-resourced regions [41, p. 212]. Expanding on Winschiers-Theophilus, Bidwell, and Blake's [86] work on Ubuntu and participation in rural communities, embedding storytelling as a method and conduit to Ubuntu-led practice has the potential to create not only knowledge-inclusive participatory spaces, but also innovations and ideas that embrace local traditions and practices. This approach will manifest differently according to the community collaborator and their context and could take the form of transect walks [40] or conversations while crafting [20, 44], but at its core, it is premised on empathic inquiry and pluriversal thinking. It is clear that the stories people tell and how they tell them are the beginnings of connection and humanity as inspired by Ubuntu, and we should continue exploring these avenues as we further decolonial PD research.

## 4 TOWARDS A BROADER LANDSCAPE: DECOLONIAL PD BEYOND UBUNTU

Ubuntu is not the only philosophy that is premised on humanity and interconnectedness. On the African continent, Ubuntu is understood as Botho in Botswana [25], Unhu in Zimbabwe [47], Ujamaa in Tanzania [61], Utu in Kenya [84], and Obuntu in Uganda [52], each nation bringing their own interpretation and lived experience to what it means to embody their respective approaches to community, humanity, and connectedness. Much of these embodiments are passed down through storytelling and indigenous knowledge practices and serve as ways to remind communities of their continuous connection to each other and the world. How we can embrace these qualities in the work we as participatory designers and researchers do practically exposes exciting opportunities for novel approaches to engagement and collaboration.

The path forward for Participatory Design should investigate the opportunities for the embrace of Indigenous lenses in how we, as a collective, can continue countering Western modes of engagement and move towards malleable and context-specific approaches to PD

suitable for Global South contexts. Future directions to expound on Ubuntu-centric PD specifically, include a workshop in which PD practitioners and community members explore how Ubuntu has been adopted practically. The aim being to work towards a set of guidelines that can inform community-centred, decolonial PD that incorporates indigenous knowledge and philosophies from the Global South. Further explorations and philosophies of interest can also include, what it means to embrace the community-support, Kenyan practice of Harambee [60] in our PD practice. In what ways can a PD research agenda be further informed by the decolonial stance of Buen Vivir adopted in Latin America [4, 31], which conveys collective wellbeing in nature-culture environments? How can digital storytelling support oral traditions in an effort to preserve and promote indigenous knowledge frameworks, but also to initiate intergenerational connections? These concepts, and others, encourage thinking beyond the human as participant in community-based work and considering the world we inhabit as integral to our lives as the people in our orbit. To ensure a decolonial PD practice, in and from the Global South, we need to bear these concepts in mind, as well as the way knowledge is produced and situated, and in what ways we can embrace the ubiquity of storytelling in the decolonial participatory design endeavour.

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