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On sustainability and higher education: Towards an affirmative ethics

Abstract

Sustainable development has been the dominant focus in sustainability discourses over the past three decades. In 2015, the United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a blueprint for peace and prosperity. The agenda is to be driven by the now well-known 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The higher education sector has not been left unaffected by these developments. In 2021, we saw Times Higher Education (2021) for the first time introducing its impact rankings, which assess universities against the United Nation's SDGs. This new category of the university ranking system may see universities increasingly account for their contributions towards both ecological sustainability and social justice. Paradoxically, higher education would have to embrace SDG targets as a social justice imperative, but within a neoliberal performance architecture and by applying the ethics of neoliberal market fundamentalism. In this article, we trouble the underlying normative, economy first (instrumentalist) assumption and anthropocentric approach to sustainability and its relationship with (higher) education. We argue that sustainability is not a means to an end (instrumentalist), but a social and ethical process that is situated, open and forever in-becoming. In doing so, we draw on Rosi Braidotti's (2019; 2013) critical, posthumanist perspective, which enables us to perform two methodological moves: 1) a critical philosophical exploration of the concept sustainability and 2) generating affirmative propositions for thinking about sustainability education. At the heart of Braidotti's (2019; 2013) postulations is the affirmation of hope to enable sustainable transformations and futures. In addition, she proposes an ethics of joy and affirmation that functions through transforming negativity into positivity. Through this affirmative ethical philosophy, we offer alternative imaginings of sustainability and generate six affirmative propositions for sustainability in higher education.

Keywords: *sustainability; higher education; affirmative ethics; sustainability education*

1. Introduction

The word 'sustainability'[1] appeared for the first in an English dictionary as recently as the 1970s. Its appearance followed a dawning awareness in the Western, Anglo-Saxon world that planet Earth has finite resources and

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1   Sustainability is a broad concept that concerns the ability of something to endure or continue unabated. Sustainable development is one approach to sustainability, amongst others.

that human actions are eroding the planet's biophysical base. Aldo Leopold's (1949) *A Sandy Almanac* and Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* are two of the seminal works that inspired calls for greater emphasis on conservation in the post-World War II era. However, in the wake of the first conference on Human Development held in Stockholm in 1972, there was disillusionment among countries of the developing world, because the conference emphasised conservation. These countries argued that they needed opportunities to develop and that it was convenient for countries that were more developed to argue for conservation. To address competing aspirations, sustainability became (re)configured by governments and supranational organisations such as the United Nations (UN) as sustainable development (SD). A consequence of this reconfiguration was that sustainability became framed in anthropocentric terms. The popular definition of sustainable development captured in the Brundtland Commission report shows SD's strong anthropocentric focus: "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). The needs emphasised in this definition focus on those of present and future generations of humans.

Sustainable development was reinforced at several intergovernmental conventions such as the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 (Le Grange, 2003). In 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2015), which is to serve as a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet in the present and the future. This agenda will be driven by the now popularly known 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), which call for actions on the part of countries, also in partnership with one another. These developments have resulted in sustainability being constructed as policy (something external to life itself) and as goals to be achieved, as opposed to a frame of mind, as well as an ethical process of becoming, bearing testimony to the instrumentalism associated with the term. Instrumentalism, or merely viewing sustainable development as a means to an end, is also evident in the way in which sustainable development has become associated with education in the notion, Education for Sustainable Development (EFSD). The United Nations, for example, declared the decade 2005 to 2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESC), giving prominence to the idea that education should be narrowly directed in the interest of a particular understanding of sustainability. More recently, we have seen sustainability being couched in performative terms, with the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings introduced in 2020 (Times Higher Education, 2021). This ranking system measures universities in terms of their success in delivering the United Nation's sustainable development goals.

Despite all the above efforts, the state of the planet has worsened. The inequality gap has widened (globally and in South Africa), glaciers continue to melt, floods and droughts have increased due to climate change, biodiversity loss is increasing, more virulent viruses are found such as SARS-CoV-2, and many more. The problem is that responses to the global environmental crisis (such as the ones mentioned) are based on the same thinking that caused these problems in the first place. Sustainability, in this context, remains an instrumentalist endeavour that is linked to policy discourse. What we argue for is a non-instrumentalist approach to sustainability that is informed by an immanent ethics involving the becoming of the subject. We argue that our thinking on/about/with sustainability needs to change and therefore in this article we draw on Rosi Braidotti's (2019; 2013) critical posthumanist perspectives, which enable us to perform two methodological moves: 1) a critical philosophical exploration

of the concept sustainability and 2) generating affirmative propositions for thinking about sustainability education. At the heart of Braidotti's (2019; 2013) postulations is the affirmation of hope to enable sustainable transformations and futures. In addition, she proposes an ethic of joy and affirmation which functions through transforming negativity into positivity. Through this affirmative ethical philosophy, we offer alternative imaginings of sustainability and generate six affirmative propositions for sustainability in higher education.

2.   Our methodological (dis)position

We frame our conceptual exploration within the realm of speculative philosophy, more specifically, Braidotti's (2013) critical posthumanism. Braidotti's (2013) critical posthumanism is informed by her anti-humanist roots and aims to develop affirmative perspectives on the posthuman subject; that is, to affirm the productive potential of the posthuman predicament as we are caught between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Sixth Extinction. Genealogically, Braidotti's critical posthumanism can be traced back to the poststructuralists, the anti-universalism of feminism and the anti-colonial phenomenology of Frantz Fanon and his teacher Aimé Césaire. Braidotti (2013) argues that what all these intellectual endeavours have in common is a sustained commitment to work out the implications of posthumanism for mutual understandings of the human subject and humanity as a whole. Importantly, she points out that the situated cosmopolitan posthumanism produced by these intellectual endeavours are supported by both the European tradition and by 'non-Western' sources of moral and intellectual inspiration. Braidotti (2013) points out that another powerful source of inspiration for present-day reconfigurations of critical posthumanism is ecological and environmentalist. This relates to the larger sense of subjectivity and how it evokes the interconnections between self and others, including the more-than-human-world (Le Grange, 2018). When one does critical posthuman work, the aim is to understand the actual and to hypothesise the virtual (what could be) (Koole 2020). In the article we make two methodological moves: 1) conceptual critique of the actual, and 2) generating affirmative propositions of the virtual (what could be).

3.   Slippages in the sustainability debate

Literature bears testimony to the contested nature of sustainability and its association with education. Le Grange (2017: 95) highlights some of the criticism levelled against sustainability and in particular its couching as sustainable development,

> it has internal contradictions, it manifests epistemological difficulties, it reinforces a problematic anthropocentric stance, it has great appeal as a political slogan, it is a euphemism for unbridled economic growth, it is too fuzzy a term to convey anything useful, and it does not take into consideration the asymmetrical relationship between present and future generations.

The internal contradictions relate to the coinage of the term 'sustainable development', in an attempt to satisfy opposite aspirations (conservation and development). Drawing on the discourse analyst Norman Fairclough, Stables (1996) argues that compound terms such as sustainable development are created by politicians in democratic societies in an attempt to satisfy diverse desires, but remain ideal regulative notions that result in gaps between policy sloganizing and policy implementation. Le Grange (2013) goes further and argues that the notion of 'need' (captured in the Brundtland Commission report) should be viewed as a political instrument and that 'needs' in relation to sustainability should be viewed as part of political discourses on 'needs' that have become constructed in late capitalist societies. Therefore,

the angle of vision on 'needs' should be on the politics of needs – on needs discourses (for a detailed discussion see Le Grange, 2013). The epistemologically difficulties relate to narrowing of the discourse on sustainability by framing it as sustainable development, and in so doing limiting the pathways for knowing in relation to sustainability.

Moreover, the instrumentalism associated with sustainable development implies that we have come to know about sustainability in relation to predefined goals such as the SDGs. Le Grange (2016) argues that the SDGs provide an *a priori* image of a future global society. The anthropocentricism associated with sustainability is not only concerned with its focus on human needs and desires, but that constructions of sustainability in mainstream discourse are correlates of human thought – constructs of sustainability as policy, political slogan, goals, political discourses, etc. Correlationism is a term coined by speculative realist Meillassoux (2008) and holds that reality appears only as a correlate of human thought. Speculative realists, of course, trouble the notion of correlationism and this philosophical approach is concerned with speculating possibilities of understanding reality independent of human thought. These philosophers therefore view traditional continental philosophy as anthropocentric because of the latter's entrapment in correlationism (*ibid*). Furthermore, in an era of neoliberal capitalism, sustainability has become co-opted into neoliberal agendas and in doing so has become a euphemism for unbridled economic growth driven by market interests. In her book, *Hijacking Sustainability*, Parr (2009) argues that sustainability has become co-opted by governments, the military and the corporate world. The upshot of this is that sustainability has become driven by the power of *potestas,2* with effects that are colonising, homogenising and normalising. Moreover, this co-option has meant that sustainability has become rationalised in terms of resources (to be used and managed). Irwin (2008) argues that the stabilisation of 'sustainability' as a metaphor for a market-oriented neoliberal ethos of managing resources radically limits the spectrum of approaches to environmentalism.

The relationship between sustainability and education, in particular the notion education for sustainable development (EFSD), is also a contested terrain. Some scholars within the critical tradition such as Fien (1993) and Huckle (1999) argue that it is necessary to educate for sustainability, given unprecedented levels of environmental destruction and growing social injustices. However, Johnson (2013) correctly observes that thirty years of critical theory have failed to present a significant challenge to the dogmas of neoliberalism – by implication it has failed to address environmental destruction and social injustices. Jickling (1992; 1997) argues that education for sustainable development is instrumentalist and that educating for anything outside of education (itself), is anti-educational and tantamount to indoctrination. For a more comprehensive discussion of instrumentalism and education for sustainable development, see Le Grange (2016). The introduction of Impact Rankings by *Times Higher Education* (2021) holds a danger of sustainability in higher education becoming reduced to an instrumentalist logic that narrows the discourse on sustainability in universities and the pathways for learning about/with sustainability. In this article, we prefer to use the term 'sustainability education' instead of 'education for sustainability/sustainable development'. We argue that 'sustainability education' is a more worthwhile signifier for the relationship between sustainability and education because it is non-instrumentalist. Sustainability education does not denote an *a priori* image of sustainability, nor does it determine the education pathway towards achieving sustainability (Le Grange, 2017). Rather, it opens up possibilities for critical discussions on/ with sustainability and proposes learning processes that are always in-becoming.

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2   *Potestas* refers to negative power that is exerted through dominance, coercion and force. *Potestas* is a restrictive force which manifests when power is complex, scattered and productive (Braidotti, 2013).

There have, of course, been productive responses to dominant discourses on sustainability and we note some of these affirmative propositions briefly. Bonnett (2002) suggests that instead of viewing sustainability as policy (an ideal), we should think about sustainability as a frame of mind – as a way of thinking. Hroch (2014) expands on this idea by arguing that we should not only sustain things, but also become sustainability thinkers so that we may think differently about ourselves, subjectivity, our becoming and the very concept of sustainability. With reference to becoming, Le Grange (2011) argues that we could view sustainability rhizomatically, as having no fixed central point – always in-becoming and able to proliferate in multiple directions that cannot be pre-fixed. Brown (2015) draws on Ernesto Laclau's notion of 'empty signifier' as an affirmative proposition for sustainability (education). In short, an 'empty signifier' does not mean that it does not signify anything, but rather that it opens up possibilities for multiple significations, including those that affirm sustainability in ways that counter its signification in dominant discourses. As a counter to the co-option of sustainability by governments, the military and corporate world, Parr (2009: 165) argues for a grassroots movement, which she calls 'sustainability culture' that taps into the creative and productive energies of *potentia,3* inviting us "to imagine and design alternatives to how a culture is produced, disseminated, and consumed".

In this article we wish to take the discussion further by arguing that we need to rethink sustainability (education) more radically to explore how it can be liberated from the fetters of anthropocentric correlationism, which is based on transcendent thinking. Transcendent thinking has given rise to instrumentalist approaches to sustainability (education), narrowing the discourse on the sustainability and limiting ways of knowing, subjectivity and becoming vis-à-vis sustainability. Through immanent thinking, we believe that the instrumentalist and anthropocentric focus of sustainability (education) can be challenged to ignite a relational approach to sustainability (education). A relational approach considers a posthuman subjectivity that recognises all forms of life, so that sustainability (education) is not a means in itself, but a social and ethical process that is situated, open and forever in-becoming. It is this type of critical posthumanist perspective, which enables us to offer alternative imaginings of sustainability and generate possible affirmative propositions for sustainability in higher education.

4. Affirmative posthuman ethics

We live in times marked by what Braidotti (2020) terms a posthuman convergence: enjoying the excitement of technology, bio-medical advancements, globalisation, and hybridity, but at the same time fearing the painful effects of these on both human and non-human planetary inhabitants. The posthuman convergence is marked by a critical call for a subjectivity that can "build on the generative potential of already existing critiques of both Humanism and anthropocentrism, in order to deal with the complexity of the present situation" (Braidotti, 2019: 9). Part of moving beyond humanist exceptionalism yearns for an understanding of the posthuman subject as relational on at least three different levels; "to one's self, to others and to the world", where the world is a complex set of environmental, social and affective ecologies (Braidotti, 2019: 45). As such life is not exclusively human; "it encompasses both *bios* and *zoe* forces, as well as geo- and techno-relations" (Braidotti, 2019: 45).[4] Recognising the limitations

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3   *Potentia* refers to positive, affirmative power that is by its nature productive and could be understood as one way of opening up to new possibilities for self-affirmation (Braidotti, 2013).

4   Braidotti (2019: 10) avers that the more classical understanding is that *bios* pertains to the life of humans organised in society, whereas *zoe* refers to the life of all living beings.

of life as anthropocentric warrants exploring more transversal conceptions of what a subject is and how this might invoke rethinking sustainability (education) more radically.

For Braidotti (2019: 11), in posthuman times, the subject should have at least these four attributes. One is the need to take distance from abstract universalism and to be materially embedded. A second is the subject as embodied, which entails challenging transcendental thinking by decentring transcendental consciousness and instrumentalist thinking. An alternative understanding of difference is a third attribute. When difference is oppositional or grounded in binary logic, it is representational of being worth less than. For a posthuman subject, difference is "an imminent, positive and dynamic category" (Braidotti, 2019: 12). Last, is the affirmation of affectivity and relationality as an alternative to individualist autonomy. When drawing on these four attributes, it could be argued that for the posthuman subject, sustainability (education) can then be regarded as a concrete social and ethical practice and "not the abstract economic ideal that development and social planning specialists often reduce it to" (Braidotti, 2011: 310). In other words, sustainability (and endurance as an intensive notion) is not a means to an end (instrumentalist), but a social and ethical process that is situated, open and forever in-becoming. It holds that sustainability (education) is capable of different things and this can occur at "different speeds of becoming" (Braidotti, 2019: 42). Difference is not a means to categorisation but is rather a dynamic process of becoming that allows for multiple directions with no fixed central point so that sustainability can be viewed in rhizomatic terms (Le Grange, 2011). With this goes the point of posthuman subjectivity as affirmative relational activity, namely "in constant negotiation with multiple others and immersed in conditions that it is trying to understand and modify, if not overturn" (Braidotti, 2019: 42). Sustainability (education) as transversal and relational denies liberal individualism so that there is a qualitative shift from individualism (as emanating from identity politics) to relationism.

These postulations align with Deleuze's dismissal of life as a teleological notion (a means to an end) – or sustainability (education) as a means to an end. The rejection of transcendent notions of the subject and/or sustainability (education) is the invocation of radical immanence that is underscored by *amor fati* (complete worldly love) in its radical immanence, namely that, i.e. "life, simply by being life, expresses itself" (Braidotti, 2011: 230).[5]

The posthuman subject thus has the potential for immanent thinking as it is immersed and immanent to this world; a closed world where there is no escape to the outside, nor any crossing over borders/boundaries to some distant realm as is the case with transcendent thinking (Verhoef & Du Preez, 2020: 146). Braidotti draws on Deleuze's notion of radical immanence (an absolute, pure immanence), which is a total rejection of epistemological and metaphysical transcendence. For Deleuze, pure immanence is that which is free from representation, hierarchies and eternal, fixed values; and calls for a creative and free ethics (Deleuze, 2007). Such ethics are informed by the positive affirmative philosophies of Nietzsche and Spinoza who greatly influenced Deleuze's thinking. Furthermore, Deleuze "… considered immanence not as a concept, but as the pre-philosophical horizon against which thinking can be creative and productive" (Verhoef & Du Preez, 2020: 146). Verhoef and Du Preez (*ibid*) continues by stating that "… immanence positively acknowledges our interconnectedness as

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5   Etymologically, the concept 'transcendence' is comprised of the Latin prefix *trans*- which means 'across' – and *scandere* (Latin) which literally means 'to climb', i.e. the action of ascending or a type of 'crossing over' to somewhere beyond or outside of this world (Verhoef, 2016). Immanence, on the other hand, is not concerned with anything outside of this world, but focuses on the inside of a thing or person (being) (Blackburn, 2005). Immanence comes from the Latin prefix *in*- ('in') and *manere* ('remain').

human beings with the material world in which we find ourselves in, and our connectedness to nature and matter in being of nature and matter ourselves". Immanent thinking could challenge the anthropocentric focus of sustainability (education) as it stands for the decentring of the notion of 'man as the measure of all things' and calls for a relational approach to sustainability (education). This relational approach should take account of all forms of life, present and future, and not be limited to what humans alone are capable of. Sustainability (education) based on immanent thinking thus has the potential to surpass the superficial, temporal notion of sustainability that begets its instrumental character, and replaces it with a more intensive notion of endurance that is driven by relational encounters. In this regard Braidotti (2013: 138) argues that

> [t]he inner coherence of this posthuman subject is held together by the immanence of his/her expressions, acts and interactions with others and by the powers of remembrance, or continuity in time. I refer to this process in terms of sustainability, so as to stress the idea of endurance which it entails. Sustainability does assume faith in a future, and also a sense of responsibility for 'passing on' to future generation a world that is liveable and worth living in. A present that endures is a sustainable model for the future.

Radical immanence is a continual process of affirming life as meaningful in itself (Verhoef & Du Preez, 2020: 152). It also allows for a new kind of ethics; one that is immanent, non-normative and that is in-becoming, creative, and truly free (Verhoef & Du Preez, 2020: 161). In other words, this kind of ethics is of this world and not from some transcendent world (i.e. it is a secular ethics). It is not driven by pre-determined normative constructs (and is therefore not instrumentalist), and is fluid insofar as it allows for the continuous becoming. It is also creative and free, as it is an ethics that is not merely informed by critical theory that resists the present (and fails to put alternatives on the table), but also informed by the relationship between creation and critique (Braidotti, 2011: 267) and the speculative possibilities it opens for a new way to (re)negotiate ethics and its underscoring normative trajectories freely in the wake of the posthuman predicament. For Braidotti (2011: 317), "[e]thics is a thin barrier against the possibility of extinction. It is a mode of actualizing sustainable forms of transformation". This, she states, requires assemblages of interaction to increase active becomings and avoid the diminishing of one's *potentia*.

Potentia as a form of power is filled with inherent positivity and is empowering and affirmative, as opposed to *potestas* that is driven by negativity and warped power relations, which is disempowering. Braidotti (*ibid*) avers that to fulfil the inherent positivity of *potentia*, it "must be formatted in the direction of sustainability". Affirmative ethics is a process of transforming the negative underpinning *potestas* into the positive that comes with *potentia*; i.e. it is a transformation from resentment to affirmation as Nietzsche suggested (Braidotti, 2011: 314). Furthermore, affirmative ethics is not a naïve optimism or unrealism, "[i]t is about endurance and transformation. Endurance is self-affirmation. It is also an ethical principle of affirmation of the positivity of the intensive subject – its joyful affirmation as *potentia*" (*ibid*).

5. Standing in the cracks: On sustainability and higher education

McCloskey's observation that "(t)here appears to be a lack of critical engagement in the international development sector with the SDGs and their capacity to impose meaningful change on a dangerously deregulated neoliberal economic system" is compelling (McCloskey, 2019: 155). Two important inferences can be drawn from this assertion. Firstly, a neoliberal approach to sustainability prevails despite evidence that development outcomes continue to

confound. Secondly, the research community, including those located in higher education, has had little effect in influencing any shift in what McCloskey (2019: 155) describes as a "managerialist and technical approach to development" and by extension to sustainability. If anything, neoliberal, market-oriented discourse that now permeates all spheres of higher education is likely to sit uncomfortably alongside sustainability discourses.

Drawing on Deleuzian inspiration, we contemplate what proceeding rhizomatically might mean for higher education and the sustainability (education) project. We argue for a conceptualisation of the sustainability project as immanent (always in-becoming), embodied, embedded, flexible and inclusive, as opposed to instrumentalist, solution-offering advocacy that fertilises the seeds of its own unravelling. We are acutely aware that moving towards engendering a relational affirmative ethic in higher education is in conflict with the neoliberal performative ethic that now occupies higher education's economy (for profit) enterprise. Of particular concern is that the sustainability agenda, already muddied by the United Nations anthropocentric bias, as evident in the subtext of the concept 'sustainable development' (critiqued above), has been institutionalised and now parades as a key performance area (KPA) for university managers, with quantifiable outcomes/deliverables. As such, neoliberal managers are likely to approach sustainability as a check-box exercise and might be impervious to the anthropocentric predisposition of sustainable development goals. Higher education research funders (with knowledge economy pursuits) apprehend this anthropocentric inclination as a moot point. It does raise the question as to the nature of outcomes in projects that claim to address sustainable development goals as they are currently envisaged, given its anthropocentric skewness.

What becomes clear, is that the sustainability project appears to be circumscribed already within pre-established neoliberal contours, the realisation of which might not be obvious to the rank-and-file academic. As with the decolonisation (of the curriculum) imperative (that appears to have become a mandatory, 'moral' obligation that higher education institutions in South Africa have been propelled into) with sustainability (education), it is not unreasonable to expect that university academics (researchers) might have different levels of proclivity for the sustainability project, let alone any level of nuanced understanding of its anthropocentric predilection. The enormity of the sustainable (education) project is obvious and begs the question as to how and who should take up the responsibility of developing a new generation of sustainability activists – eco-critical activists that embrace the posthuman predicament as the interconnectedness of subjects, both humans and the more-than-human world. How might the energies, intellect and established 'infrastructure' of existing enclaves of resistance (with critical, social justice-oriented agendas) be harnessed (posthuman convergence) to create a critical mass of conscientized sustainability (education) activists? The recent re-sprouting of the decolonial project with renewed vibrancy is a prime example of activism sustainability (education) might well 'piggy-back' on. It might in fact be argued that the decolonial agenda and the sustainability (education) agenda are not incommensurate – if anything, indigenous notions of sustainability, ones that understand and respect the harmonious articulation between ecosphere and biosphere, present as rich contextual, cultural and spiritual resources from which to draw inspiration – *potentia*, the rhizomatic power of which explodes with possibility.

Arguably the most vexing task is the process of disruption and dislodgement of current anthropocentric and neoliberal discourses. While neither the posthuman (nor the sustainability) project is not new, its evolving discourse (ways of thinking, being and speaking), does not enjoy the same level of engagement and prevalence as reigning neoliberal meta-narrative

discourses. How might 'emerging' concepts like ecological justice, anthropomorphism, speciesism, diffraction and anthropoharmonism, for example, become common-speak, internalised and integrated across the higher curriculum? How might higher education professional development programmes be (re)configured or reimagined to signal sustainability (education) as desirable graduate attribute?

While there is a wariness about the institutionalisation of sustainability (education) as 'compulsory' dimension of curriculum for example, such institutionalisation might well have positive spinoffs for exposing, engaging with and elevating a posthuman discourse. Arrogant, purist notions of sustainability (education) are not likely to gain traction – that conflict and contradiction are immanent to immanence – are congruent with a rhizomatics that is being proposed. Bottrell and Manathunga's (2018) strategic notion of standing in the cracks, with the view to prising open such cracks, as well as Anzaldúa's inspiration to embrace the proverbial borderlands as spaces of productive resistance (Anzaldua, 1987), one that allies with the likeminded (critical scholars) in contesting hegemonic strangleholds, has salience for how one might contemplate the sustainability (education) project in higher education. This strategy might entail seeking out fissures – opportunities that present to disrupt or trouble 'new' canons (like neoliberalism) before they consolidate in the academic space. It might also entail forming and strengthening alliances – to develop a critical mass of activist voices. In (human) development-focused universities in the South, how might a posthuman conception of the subject post-humanist (scholars/researchers) widen the net(work)? How might critical discourse analysts, for example, extend their work beyond the socio-linguistic to consider eco-linguistics as exemplified by the recent work of Mauritian researcher Hookoomsing (2021), for example.

Ulmer (2017: 11) reminds us that

> The language and materiality of posthumanism creates openings for research, educational and otherwise … as ice melts and the seas continue to rise, the habitats of multiple species are disappearing. This creates several potential futures for educational classrooms: at the same time that ocean waves threaten the island classrooms of soon-to-be climate refugees, 'green' private schools made of bamboo are being placed in jungles to teach students about the environment. Because we live in a time of environmental exigency, there are opportunities for both education and educational research to respond in democratic ways. This is a critical endeavor. It is critical in the sense that it is urgent, and it critical from a theoretical and philosophical perspective, as well.

6. Parting thoughts: Towards affirmative propositions for sustainability and higher education

The discussion on immanent ethics and the becoming of the subject serve as basis for the affirmative propositions for sustainability (education) in the context of higher education that we argue could provide alternative perspectives to thinking about sustainability education. But who is this becoming subject? For the purpose of this article, it is conscientized sustainability (education) activists, or generally, those like-minded people who embrace the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human-world as a counterforce to how sustainability has been perceived in dominant policy discourses.

Firstly, as we have seen from the introduction, education is often perceived as an intervention to attain goals associated with sustainability, for example. Perceived as such, education becomes instrumentalist; a means to an end, driven by externally defined goals.

A transcendent justification for sustainability (education) could thus potentially deny the immanent meaningfulness that education has. An immanent justification acknowledges education as good in and of itself (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019: 69). Higher education institutions should thus strive towards an affirmative ethics that is immanent, non-normative, in-becoming, creative and truly free and that emphasises an immanent justification to education, should they seriously want to pursue the question of sustainability (education) – one that is not limited to transcendent justifications that is essentially interventionist.

Secondly, for sustainability education to be invigorated in a non-instrumentalist way it needs to be approached as constantly in-becoming. Pinar's (2012) conception of complicated conversation proves insightful in this regard. He warns that our education institutions have too long been "cram schools" and "academic businesses plundered by profiteers" with an absence of participating in education as an ongoing conversation in all its complexity with human and non-human assemblages (Pinar, 2012: 11). Rather than devising sustainability education as "airtight" arguments (*ibid*), conversation is complicated, because it is a multi-referenced interlocutor among those present, not present and with one's selves (that have been, are now and who are in the process of becoming) as well as ongoing with no intent of reaching congealed conclusions (Pinar, 2012: 43). They are not nonchalant, but also do not necessarily mirror an anterior aim or objective (Pinar, 2012: 50). For Pinar (2012: 47) "it is conversation with oneself … and with others threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilised for engagement in the world". For sustainability education, this would imply the type of engagement that is not an end within itself, but rather generative. different conceptions of who the teacher is as well as how we might approach pedagogy and research.

The place of the teacher forms our third proposition and draws on Biesta's (2017) inspirational work that has resonance with our approach to contemplating sustainability (education) and the teaching and learning thereof. While Biesta (2017) was not writing about sustainability in particular, he skilfully analyses the role of the teacher in emancipatory education by bringing into dialogue the work of renowned critical pedagogy scholar Paulo Freire and that of contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière. He alerts us to Freire's concern with authoritarian knowledge and banking education and Rancière's lament of the stultifying effects of the master explicator. Biesta (2017: 52) concludes that "emancipatory education … is a process in which teachers and their teaching are indispensable … (that) teaching remains indispensable for emancipatory education". In the context of the somewhat sparse (and fragile) understandings of sustainability in the South African higher education context, Biesta's (2017) affirmation of the role of the (university) teacher is important – he cautions, though, about the awareness of the indoctrinating effects of transmission teaching and the construction of teachers as expert (sustainability) knowledge holders. We thus suggest a conception of the higher education teacher as 'in-becoming' and not 'all-knowing', and advocate teaching as 'learning with', as opposed to 'teaching to'.

This leads us to our fourth proposition, namely the importance of slow sustainability education that involves cultivating deceleration as a form of resisting neo-liberalism's appropriation of sustainability. Berg and Seeber's (2016) stance to cultivating deceleration resonates in their postulation of a slow professor movement that challenges the culture of the pedagogy and research. This movement "takes back the intellectual life of the university" so that pedagogical concerns such as sustainability education "advocate deliberation over acceleration" and harness "open-ended inquiry" as a crucial component to higher education

(Berg & Seeber, 2016: x). Braidotti (2019: 148) supports this movement for its ability to resonate with a more "embodied and embedded vision of intelligence, as a situational and affective quality". From this vantage point, a collaborative approach is promoted because of its vision for sharing and communal learning instead of "the fierce competition, self-sufficient individualism and accelerating pace", so that deliberations are more important than pedagogy and research as productivity for the sake of malignant velocities of advanced capitalism (*ibid*). Braidotti (*ibid*) also stresses that as an ethical endeavour, the slow movement enables an open-ended nature to thinking that is "connected to an openness to others, which also includes non-human agents" (*ibid*).

Our discussion on instrumentalism and slowness gives rise to our fifth proposition, which is the valuing of beauty amidst the ugliness of environmental destruction, inequality in the world and neoliberal capitalist practices more generally. In writing about the University of Beauty, Bearn (1997) avers that beauty is pointless, non-representational and formless. This is not because beauty has no form, but because it has an indeterminate number of forms that stimulate the playful pleasure of the beautiful. Bearn (*ibid*) argues that enjoying formlessness is akin to caressing. Caressing is pointless in the sense that there is no single point, no starting or endpoint that can be determined in an *a priori* manner. In relation to sustainability (education), Le Grange (2020) suggests that the lecturer could invite students to engage in a conceptual caressing of the indeterminate multiplicity of forms and representations of sustainability. He writes, "conceptually caressing the myriad of forms and representations of sustainability will take time, therefore pedagogy in respect of sustainability should be slow – not be characterised by the efficiency of performativity" (Le Grange, 2020: 6).

Our sixth proposition is that we should generate new words, curriculum words that are life enhancing and advancing. This would involve jettisoning or rethinking performative words such as aims, objectives, outcomes, curriculum development, and so forth. The words are dehumanising, colonising and makes pedagogy cold and heartless – the Earth becomes a stage of which pedagogy is performed, instead of pedagogy being attuned to the rhythms and intensities of the Earth (Le Grange 2016). Le Grange (*ibid*) suggests two 'new' words that he opines are attuned to sustainability (education) that is life enhancing: curriculum improvisation and curriculum experimentation. He writes,

> improvisation [is] … not only … concerned with the human that reverberates from within and is animated, but to include the vibrations of the Earth, its flows, rhythms and creative intensities. We need to create new concepts that open up opportunities for experimentation. It is in experimentation with the real that we expand our powers to enhance life in a context where we are presented with challenges of a posthuman condition (Le Grange, 2016: 34).

We do not wish to conclude by summing up what we have discussed in this article for the reader. Much more could be said about sustainability (education) and many more affirmative propositions could be generated. We invite the reader to join us in generating such propositions and to engage in complicated conversations on/with sustainability (education), where the conversation is not about what sustainability (education) is, but about what it could become. We have raised critical questions vis-à-vis sustainability (education) in order to break with the way in which sustainability (education) has become framed in dominant discourses and offered affirmative propositions so that sustainability in higher education could be reimagined, free from the strictures of neoliberalism. We invite the reader to stand with us in prising open the cracks in neoliberal higher education to invigorate multiple pathways for sustainability (education) in the interest of advancing all of life.

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