



The regenerative power of curriculum theorising: feminine wonderings/wanderings (without)

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Abstract

Ubuntu-currere, resonates with Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity (inspired by the figuration of the salamander) in the sense that they are both regenerative processes although the former might be viewed as a macro-process and the latter a micro-process. Ubuntu-currere concerns the (ongoing) unfolding/becoming of the human in intra-action with other humans and more-than-human world - a re/generative process of mind-body-soul. In this article, author 1 narrates her story of becoming-woman through weaving together her engagement with the work of Catherine Malabou, including the notion of plasticity, and Le Grange's ubuntu-currere. After the autobiophilosophy of author 1, we draw on the concept *curriculum as complicated conversation* whereby author 2 engages in a diffractive reading of author 1's autobiophilosophy, through conceptually experimenting with Malabou's references to wondering (French: admiration) and Barad's notion of wondering/wandering (imagination). Curriculum as complicated conversation concerns processes in which curriculum scholars engage in open and frank intra-actions, by listening to others for the purpose of self-criticism. We propose that wandering/wondering could add yet another dimension to the notion of complicated conversation and contribute to thinking of alternative possibilities for the field and for the becoming of pedagogical lives.

Keywords Autobiophilosophy · Complicated conversation · Difference · Feminism · Plasticity · Ubuntu-currere · Wondering/wandering

Introduction

Difference has received some attention in the field of curriculum studies, particularly in the arenas of critical pedagogy, gender and queer studies and poststructuralist work. This work has focused mainly on the politics of difference and identity work (see for example, Giroux, 1992; Wang, 2014; Popkewitz, 2015). One article has given particular attention to curriculum as difference (see Hwu, 2004). Continuing the theme of difference, and in response to the call for papers to this special issue, which invites theoretically innovative work, we revisit the notion of difference in Curriculum Studies by drawing on Catherine Malabou's exploration of the

feminine in her philosophical work *Changing Difference*. Malabou (2011) argues for a (dis)position that is opposed to both biological essentialism and the negation of women through poststructuralist deconstruction (anti-essentialism). We shall first introduce Catherine Malabou and then move onto our approach to curriculum theorising vis-a-vis difference in this article.

Catherine Malabou, a French Philosopher (b.1959), is Professor of Philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University London and at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine; a position formerly held by Jacques Derrida under whose supervision she also completed her PhD. Malabou's philosophy is inspired by her readings of Jacques Derrida, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Martin Heidegger. She extends Hegel's use of plasticity¹ and asks questions pertaining to ontological and

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¹ Plasticity, as the opposite of rigidity, refers to the ability to evolve (Malabou, 2008). Etymologically, the word plasticity (from the Greek *plassein*) refers to the capacity to receive form and to give form (Malabou, 2008). However, plasticity also relates to *plastique* (French)

sexual difference (amongst others), and brings it in relation to queer and gender theory. Her scholarly interests also include neuroscience², neuroplasticity³ and epigenetics⁴.

In *Changing Difference*, her first main feminist work, Malabou (2011) argues that ‘woman’ remains deprived of ‘essence’, even in a postfeminist age, and has never been able to define herself in any other way than in terms of the institutional and theoretical violence done to her. Malabou (2011) avers that essentialist critiques (that there is no specifically feminine or biological essence) that gender theorists and deconstructivist scholars level, results in the ontological negation of the feminine. Anti-essentialism doxa is therefore not an option for her as translator of *Changing Difference*, Carolyn Shread (2011), writes:

Motivated by a refusal of the difference of the feminine as it is currently construed, Malabou’s change starts with naming violence, but in looking for a change that does not only allay the patterns and power of violence but that changes itself, she suggests a different tack. (p. ix)

Malabou (2011) suggests that changing difference requires considering three paradigms of recovery: Hegel’s resurrection of the phoenix, Derrida’s web woven by the spider, and the regenerative powers of the salamander. The emergence of plasticity in her philosophy is akin to the regenerative powers of the salamander and enables her to transcend the limit of deconstruction – *différance* – the web woven by the spider.

According to Malabou (2011), when a salamander loses its tail, the limb that grows back differs in size, weight, and form from the one it replaces, but leaves no scars or traces of the amputation. Structurally, the regenerated limb is the same as the amputated one. Once the salamander loses its tail, epidermic cells make their way to the stump and cover it with a protective envelope. Once this layer is re-covered, a second phase called de-differentiation takes place. This happens when stem cells that have differentiated themselves into nervous, muscular, or vascular cells lose their

specialisation and form a type of bud (regenerative blastema) from where they regenerate the entire amputated structure. This regeneration process is known as transdifferentiation. Malabou (2011) states: “The salamander reminds us, in fact, that regeneration is a de-programming, an “un-writing” if you will. [...] Today’s biologists use the concept *plasticity* to refer to the ability of cells to modify their program, to change their text.” (p. 86). Having introduced Catherine Malabou as philosopher, we shall now introduce our approach to curriculum theorising pertinent to the article.

For many schoolteachers and university lecturers, engagement with the concept curriculum relates to matters of curriculum design and development. This is likely to be the case if we have institutions such as schools and universities. However, it does not mean that other ways of viewing curriculum do not have legitimacy. Aoki (1999) reminded us that alongside the *curriculum-as-plan*, the *curriculum-as-lived* should be legitimated, which gives rise to a tensioned space between the two, a space of both struggle and creativity.

So, we draw inspiration from the reconceptualist curriculum movement that emerged in the USA in the 1970s, following Joseph Schwab’s (1969) declaration that the “curriculum is moribund.” This movement aimed to humanise curriculum and shift the angle of vision from curriculum development to understanding – understanding the stories of those who perform curriculum work. Pinar (1975) invoked the Latin root of curriculum, *currere* (which means ‘to run’) to serve as the basis for his notion of *currere* as an autobiographical method⁵. Pinar’s *currere* is opposed to the Grecian meaning of *currere* (which means chariot track), a predetermined pathway where one way of becoming is *the* way of becoming. However, Pinar’s (1975, 2011) *currere* has been expanded by Le Grange (2015, 2019), whereby *currere* is combined with the African value of ubuntu, giving rise to a notion “ubuntu-currere”. Ubuntu-currere extends the individualism associated with Pinar’s *currere* so that subjectivity becomes ecological. In other words, the human becomes in intra-action with other humans and the more/other-than human world. Ubuntu-currere,

which is an explosive substance capable of causing violent explosions (Malabou, 2008). Plasticity implies that a concept can create meaning, receive meaning, but also annihilate meaning.

² Neuroscientists study the brain and how it impacts behaviour and cognitive function by looking at how the nervous system develops, is structured, and how it works.

³ Neuroplasticity refers to the ability of the nervous system to change its activities, by changing or redirecting neuronal pathways, through intrinsic and extrinsic stimuli, by reorganising its structure, function, and/or connections after a traumatic event.

⁴ Epigenetics is the study of how cells are influenced and shaped by their environment. It thus entails the study of behaviours and environments that can cause changes in the way one’s genes work or respond.

⁵ Pinar’s (1975) *currere* has four steps/moments. The *regressive step* entails focusing on the past to enlarge and transform one’s memory. This would involve remembering all influences on one’s life in the past be they environmental, cultural, religious, educational, political, etc. and how these impact on one’s present. The *progressive step* involves focusing on the future. Here the subject envisions that which is not yet present; one meditatively imagines possible futures and also how the future inhabits the present (Pinar, 2004). This step might focus on personal aspirations but also future possibilities. The *analytical step* involves bracketing the self from the past and future to create a space of freedom in which one analyses how past and present are imbricated in one another (Pinar, 2004). The *synthetical step* entails re-entering the lived present and where one asks what the meaning of this present is.

resonates with Malabou's concept of plasticity (inspired by the figuration of the salamander) in the sense that they are both regenerative processes although the former might be viewed as a macro-process and the latter a micro-process. Ubuntu-currere concerns the (ongoing) unfolding/becoming of the human in intra-action with other humans and more-than-human world - a re/generative process of mind-body-soul⁶. The regenerative capability process of the salamander involves micro-level sub/cellular transformations as the organism encounters environmental changes. It is against this background that Petro (author 1) narrates her story of becoming woman in the next section of the article, which weaves together her engagement with the work of Catherine Malabou, including the notion of plasticity and Le Grange's ubuntu-currere.

For the part of the article following Petro's *autobiophilosophy*⁷, we draw on the concept *curriculum as complicated conversation* whereby Lesley (author 2) engages in a diffractive reading⁸ of Petro's autobiophilosophy, through conceptually experimenting with Malabou's references to wondering (French: admiration) and Barad's notion of wondering/wandering (imagination). We play on wandering/wondering inspired by Malabou's notion of admiration, and Barad's notion of imagination. We also play on acting/thinking with/out inspired by Malabou's notion of 'acting without'. Curriculum as complicated conversation concerns processes in which curriculum scholars engage in open and frank intra-actions, by listening to others for the purpose of self-criticism (for more detail see Pinar, 2004; Le Grange, 2018a). We end the article with some parting thoughts.

⁶ Transformations of mind-body-soul are of course not divorced from transformations at cellular/gene levels.

⁷ The neologism 'autobiophilosophy' was introduced by Lesley le Grange during our intra-actions in crafting this article. It refers to the entanglement of *autobiography* with *philosophy* and a more apposite term than autobiography for the work performed in this article.

⁸ Diffractive methodology was first introduced by Donna Haraway and developed further by Karen Barad. Given her background in quantum physics Barad (2007) advanced thinking on diffractive methodology by focusing on wave behaviour showing that when waves (whether light, water, or sound) overlap or meet obstacles they form patterns of difference. Drawing on Barad's insights Bozalek and Murriss (2022) points out that in diffractive methodology, "the details of one theory or philosophical position are read attentively and with care *through* rather *against* one another to come to more creative insights" (italics in original). In this article, Lesley attentively read the autobiophilosophy of Petro towards affirmatively enriching and deepening the notion of complicated conversation.

Changing difference... an autobiophilosophy

My first interest in Malabou's work was in her philosophy of neuroscience and neuroplasticity. In exploring other works of hers, I encountered *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* (2011). This book had a profound impact on my thinking and sensemaking of the (ontological) difference/s that I experienced as a young, woman scholar. I became increasingly submerged in, and growingly critical of, the many violent faces of brutal sameness, not only in the hierarchies and patriarchal structures around me, but in the (curriculum) theory that I consumed and which I liberally contributed to. My difference/s have been amplified in many ways over the years. It has shaped and bent me, it has left scars, but I think these difference/s could also be my 'epigenetic saving grace' in as far as it signals the potential for regeneration, as Malabou's salamander reminds us. But difference is not subordinate to identity (Malabou, 2010), it is not based on any predeterminate principles but emerges through human and more-than-human intra-action (Barad, 2007), and it is not merely the result of otherness where homogeneity is strived for (Du Preez & Le Grange, *Forthcoming*). Difference is not fixed, like identity sometimes is, and therefore Malabou (2011) speaks of "the plasticity of difference" (p. 36). Difference in this autobiophilosophy refers both to moments where I felt (essentially, physically, biologically, materially) different and how these changed over time, but also to a 'bigger' difference: the "reciprocal metamorphosis" (Malabou, 2011, p. 37) that took place when I undertook the exercise of writing part of my autobiophilosophy alongside ubuntu-currere that offers a re/generative process of mind-body-soul, and which is closely aligned with the thinking of Malabou about plasticity and changing difference.

Malabou (2011) argues in the end of her book that French women typically go through three main moments and encourages us to think about the change in these moments. Experimenting with these could be productive in understanding and making sense of my own experiences. Malabou uses *acting as if*, *acting together*, and *acting without* as descriptors for these three moments. *Acting as if* refers to the training years and is often coupled with inferiority nurtured during apprenticeship. *Acting together* marks the discovery of feminism and its theoretical value, but is still mostly riddled with violent, masculine discourse. *Acting without* is best described by Malabou (2011) herself:

Then at last comes the time when she goes off on her own, when she "acts without," abandoning all her previous encounters in order to begin to speak and to set herself up in an entirely new territory, the outline of

another body, another essence. This is where she feels hope - perhaps delusional - beyond essentialism and anti-essentialism, a new idea of the feminine that starts from her own philosophical impossibility. (p. 112)

Acting without is a manifestation or example of a “reciprocal metamorphosis” that Malabou (2011, p. 37) speaks of and she encourages us to ask: how do we think this change, this metamorphosis? Acting without is when one jettisons the shackles of colonising theories to pursue one’s own ‘new territory’, or ‘another essence’, to ask: ‘how do we think this change?’ As captured in the title and penultimate section of the article, we draw on Malabou’s notion of ‘acting without’ to play on ‘with/out’.

What I do next, is to tell parts of my story of becoming a woman scholar in response to thinking about my own change, and to think through the plasticity of (my) difference. This involved going through a process of naming the violence by writing my autobiographical experiences as they relate to being a woman scholar. Ubuntu-currere inspired my thinking as I went through this process of writing up my violence; and, as I read and wrote my autobiophilosophy alongside Malabou’s *Changing Difference*.

Acting as if

Acting as if refers to the training years and is often coupled with inferiority nurtured during apprenticeship.

During my training years, especially when I did my PhD and was a lecturer assistant, I was surrounded by several influential women belonging to the baby boomer generation. They were in leadership positions and proudly talked about their feminist fights and victories. Being somewhat unattuned with feminist struggles and gendered debates at the time, and more drawn to anti-essentialist understandings of gender performativity, it struck me hard how senior woman academics whom I admired (but who happened to perfect the art of masculine mimicry) violently took essentialist positions. After one discussion where senior women academics voiced their essentialist positions, I wrote the following nearly two decades ago (29 May 2006):

Evading the boxed baby-boomers

I am incarcerated in a genre that I am not au fait with;
In a genre I was not even breathing yet...
I am expected to scuffle a struggle which I do not value...
When my wings begin to flutter, my wings are cut...

cut by those who fought for me...
Why? Because I show no gratitude...

I am incarcerated in a box labeled “women” ...
In a box (rumor has it) that I do not understand;
since I don’t possess a maternity license...
When my wings begin to flutter, my wings are cut
cut by those who labeled the box...
Why? Because I show no gratitude...

Just maybe...
I do understand
I do feel
I do appreciate
But I do want to be freed...
(Freedom was strangely enough the rousing oil in the
fired struggle?)
Just maybe...
I can fly ... freely!

I wrote this poem five months after enrolling for my PhD. The poem speaks of the frustration I encountered at the time and expresses my desire to transgress the norm constructed by these women, for me to obediently follow. My PhD studies took me to Hamburg in Germany on a German Exchange programme and most of my attention turned to making sense of my political becoming. This is something I devoted much energy and time to (and worthy to narrate elsewhere), but what happened in this process is that I kind of bracketed my experiences as a woman, becoming academic. I negated my femininity by not concerning myself much with gender politics or identity politics, and in the process also adopted and uncritically began to mimic masculine behaviour (see next section for more detail).

In writing about her own becoming as woman philosopher, Malabou (2011) explains:

During my years of apprenticeship, I swore that I would wring the neck of ‘difficult philosophy’. [...] In choosing to write my doctoral dissertation on Hegel and devoting myself entirely to “pure” philosophy (no aesthetics, no applied philosophy), I swore that I would build myself razor-sharp conceptual blades and lances, that my reasoning and deductions would be exemplary in their solidity, that I would be, yes it’s true, just like the strongest man. Throw in a dose of indomitable independence, a total incapacity to entertain flattery, a deep distaste for social chitchat, an ability to detect theoretical mediocrity instantly, and an unabashed streak of savagery and you have my profile, the profile of someone who’ll never have a traditional, stellar career, but (and I’m still very proud of

this too) one who [...] has never been told what to do by anyone.” (pp. 114–115).

She continues explaining that her “...encounter with deconstruction was born largely of the desire to rediscover what I had sacrificed, which was perhaps, quite simply, my femininity” (p. 115), and then, how she later came “... to recognise that deconstruction did not offer women any real freedom to create” (p. 118).

My own experiences resonated with Malabou’s becoming. I too spent most of my time in libraries, in coffee shops, always reading. I decided to build ‘myself razor-sharp conceptual blades and lances, that my reasoning and deductions would be exemplary in their solidity, that I would be, yes it’s true, just like the strongest man’. My independence, and urge to always transgress the norm, made me less popular amongst the academic masses, but like Malabou, I’m proud that I did not succumb to being told what to do by anyone. However, I did give up telling stories (something Malabou also reflects on), I neutralised, masculinised and sanitised my language and writing (to make it more *scientific*), I assimilated a style that the dominant scientific community at the time expected a PhD candidate to embrace. This academic, sanitised, scientific style did not come naturally to me, but over time became easier. I had to acquire this theoretically violent, masculine style of writing because that was the *norm* (fully endorsed by the feminists I worked with at the time).

I began my career as a lecturer about three years after I wrote this poem. The very unfamiliar, conservative institution where I took up employment immediately ensured that *I know my place* in terms of its hierarchies and patriarchal structures. I recall an email I received from a then already retired Professor who still had considerable influence on faculty matters. He concluded his (condescending) email with: “Greetings, Oom (Uncle) Z”, followed by a note giving me permission to call him Oom (Uncle) like all the others do, and not Professor as I had addressed him in an earlier email. By doing this, he clearly explained to me where he is positioned in the patriarchal structure of the university and where I should find my place in this hierarchy (a place that in 14 years of employment I never seem to have found). Calling someone Oom (Uncle) in Afrikaans is indicative of a level of familiarity, but also an acknowledgement of someone’s age and authoritative standing in the community that young persons, particularly women should respect. My response was as follows: “Dear Professor Z, Thank you for your email. Please note that I cannot call you Oom (Uncle), because in my understanding that is a term more appropriate when referring to family and not for the professional context we were working in. In the light of that, I shall call you professor, and you are welcome to call me Dr du Preez...”. I

quickly realised how students too referred to lecturers (doctors and professors) as “Oom (Uncle)” and “Tannie (Aunt)” – a practice or tradition I openly criticised and condemned, accompanied with solid justification for my position, for more than a decade in various spaces such in classrooms, meeting rooms, and tea rooms.

Acting together

Acting together marks the discovery of feminism and its theoretical value, but is still mostly riddled with violent, masculine discourse.

As the time passed, and my exposure to overt and covert patriarchal and theoretical violence increased, my becoming-woman-scholar again brought discomfort and awakened uneasy questions. The patriarchal violence I experienced was most intense when I occupied mid-management positions in the university. Patriarchal and theoretical violence surrounded me. The Research Fellowship I received by the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (2015) gave me an opportunity to stay in Azerbaijan for 6 months, where the limits of me *being a woman* was tested every day. At one stage I feared for my safety because I had a disagreement with a male Professor about his interpretation of International Human Rights Law. My appointment as Extraordinary Professor at the University of Makumira in Tanzania, further sensitised me to the evil and horror of patriarchy that was so deeply entrenched in academic institutions and society at large. On 25 April 2017 I was an invited panellist at the institution where I was working at the time on the topic “Women in Science”. I made use of this opportunity, to voice my growing discomfort with the patriarchal and theoretical violence that is done to women, and that women participate in committing (un/knowingly). I began by problematising the persistence of patriarchy in academic spaces. I shared some scenarios and personal experiences, symptomatic of highly patriarchal structures. I provided a working definition of patriarchy and theorised the extent to which gender mainstreaming, although appealing in its intent, seems to be unproductive in patriarchal systems. My intention is not to unpack that theory here now, but to share some of the scenarios and personal experiences I shared on that panel:

[...]

A few weeks ago (beginning of 2017) I spent time conducting research at a university in Tanzania. In one of my journal inscriptions, I wrote the following: “Another day of overt sexism steered by patriarchy

of gigantic proportions. I shiver when I think of what so many women have to go through. I'm petrified for them, whilst knowing what I see and hear is only the tip of Mount Kilimanjaro... For now I'm speechless. All I can think about is why should these women do triple as much to prove their worth than the average man has to do?"

[...]

I've experienced forms of symbolic and systemic violence at this institution too, through for example observing how men address women in meetings. In one instance, about twelve professors sat around a table. One male consistently addressed all male professors as professor so and so, whilst addressing all female professors on their first names. In another instance, I noticed how men will take notes when other men speak and merely listen when a woman raises her opinions – clearly giving a message that “I'm tolerating your voice, but deem it irrelevant to note down”. Another example is men making flattering comments by jokingly making inappropriate and unprofessional comments such as “you can be glad I'm not young anymore, you would've had a hard time to escape me”. I've often felt that men patronise me by treating me as an inferior child. In some instances, I've noticed how they would change their tone when speaking to me as opposed to speaking to other men in the same conversation. This change of tone and the excessive explanations provided to me made me feel like an uninformed, dim-witted juvenile. On three different occasions I have been confronted by male colleagues about why I am not exercising my reproductive right to have children. This I experience as an overt sexist expression of their perceived ideas about the role and place of women. Internalising these experiences have resulted in me building a symbolic shield to protect myself against the violent onslaughts of male peers: a shield that was recently criticised by colleagues who accused me of “coming across too strongly and critically” and “taking matters too personally”. Building shields, I think, is one way in which women protect themselves from daily systematic and symbolic violence that they consciously and unconsciously embody over prolonged periods of being exposed to the normality of such violence.

[...]

individual women are “menstreamed” to explicitly adopt roles unlike their own for reasons such as

acceptance or respect. Thus, women “express internalized male norms of competition and hierarchical thinking through which they may exclude or even psychologically damage other[s]”. In turn, because of the image of the privileged male, some individuals aspire to be like men in order to achieve certain goals, prove a particular point, be acknowledged, and be respected.

I remember two men in particular, whose body language and facial expressions clearly demonstrated their disapproval of my arguments and questions I raised that challenged patriarchy during the panel session. However, what disturbed me more, was the superficial level that the women in the audience engaged in the question-and-answer session that followed the presentations. The discussion reverted the immediate needs of women in terms of childcare in office spaces and struggles of balancing a healthy home and professional life. Do not get me wrong, these are important matters, but cannot in my opinion come to fruition in a context where patriarchy dominates and where hierarchies that prevent change from happening, cannot be challenged, and are not changed. I got the impression then that there was a will to change the practical context, but not an acknowledgement of the necessity to challenge and change the violent onslaughts of patriarchy.

As time passed, I became more acutely aware of how my colleagues increasingly succumbed to silence in critical spaces during meetings and academic discussions. The silences around me became so loud (and worrying) that I devoted part of my professorial inaugural address on 14 August 2019 to the topic of: “Nostalgia, dialogue and silence: On the ethics of curriculum studies” (Du Preez, 2019). I spoke about different ways in which silence is performed and how it shapes our ability to respond ethically in curriculum work or dis/ables us from doing anything at times. However, it seemed that a lot of the theory fell on deaf ears... (pun intended).

The idea of *theory falling on deaf ears* had me wondering for some time... like Malabou, I spent a lot of time and energy digesting theory (to toughen up my arguments), but I struggled to do justice to the complexity of my thinking and becoming whenever I put pen to paper. I now know it was because of the way I wrote, not what I read and/or how well I understood the theory I consumed. That was another way in which I built a shield, a theoretical shield.... Nevertheless, this did not stop my hunger for theory, and my desire to express differently grew stronger over time. The violent masculine language that I uncritically mimicked was no longer satisfying my need for expressing my scholarly thinking, acting, and becoming (differently). One night in 2023 (11 September), after a rigorous complicated conversation

with a critical friend⁹, I wrote an affirmative letter to him in which I traced some of this change in my understanding and sense-making of expressing myself:

Being very much “schooled” in the critical tradition, I quickly became accustomed to the masculine, harsh (sometimes reactionist) communist language informing a lot of the praxis of Critical Theory and pedagogy (not all of it, I know!). Neo-communist philosophers like Žižek and Badiou (in my reading) also slant towards such harsh, masculine vocabulary. My innate unease with such vocabulary - that I have also (uncritically) learned/assimilated into - was part of the reason that I pursued other traditions and discourses later. It began with poststructuralism(s), feminism/s, neo-communism, and later included posthumanism (with an interest in the feminist materialism of Karen Barad and Catherine Malabou). These wanderings challenged and began to alter the harsh, masculine vocabulary that I formally learned. So, as I am just being and becoming human in the posthuman condition, it implies an indeterminate finetuning of my post-human sensibilities.

What I increasingly noticed could have been the beginning of a metamorphosis, a process of transdifferentiation, or difference changing in and through my writing. A process of “de-programming” and “un-writing” was unfolding, to use Malabou’s (2011, p. 86) terms. I changed the way I wrote theory, and theory changed the way I wrote. It made the world look much different and coupled with existential questioning because of various life-altering losses, I was forced to (once again) re/turn to the woman in me. It was time to, once and for all, discard sedimented ways of knowing and doing scholarly work in curriculum and be brave enough to experiment with alternative ways of becoming and sense-making.

Acting without

Then at last comes the time when she goes off on her own, when she “acts without,” abandoning all her previous encounters in order to begin to speak and to set herself up in an entirely new territory, the outline of another body, another essence. This is where she feels hope - perhaps delusional - beyond essentialism

and anti-essentialism, a new idea of the feminine that starts from her own philosophical impossibility. (Malabou, 2012, p. 112).

My becoming-woman (and) curriculum scholar has taken interesting and unforeseen turns and ended up passing strange avenues and chasing speed-hungry fast lanes. This becoming is enriched by each intra-action in life and the academe. One major thing I grappled with in my recent writing (Du Preez, 2023) was to re/learn to express myself and un/learn the neutral, masculine, and sanitised language I have assimilated into and used; calling it *scientific writing*. This form of writing is nothing other than epistemic and theoretical violence. Acting without, now for me means acting without theory, or acting without foregrounding theory and always privileging the discursive. Acting without begins with paying attention to the material; matter as it unfolds in the here and now. And, acting without, is also so much more. It invites us, or maybe necessitates us, to abandon moribund ways of thinking, doing, acting, and theorising curriculum. To experiment with alternative ways of navigating ourselves in new territories of style and writing. Maybe Malabou’s delusion of hope is less delusional after all. There is always hope where there is freedom to experiment with alternative ways of thinking, doing, acting, and theorising curriculum, and becoming-woman, in general. What was pivotal on my journey so far is the critical friends I have intra-acted with and how our complicated conversations have enabled me to become ever more self-critical and open to the immanent possibilities of becoming-woman-scholar.

Of the nearly 60 peer reviewed academic articles and chapters that I have produced in just short of two decades, the change in my style and writing through experimentation is only becoming more prominent now. In 2020 I co-authored an article in which I produced poetry to *thread the line* of our argument (Du Preez & Simmonds, 2020). In this same article we also problematise expressibility, something I continuously pick up thereafter. In 2022, I co-authored another article about experiences of reading groups (Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022). This article demonstrates different ways of expressing once we take the time to slow down scholarship. In yet another co-authored article, we experiment with writing (posthumanism) differently by using the strike-through function in expressing the problem of hauntology (Le Grange & Du Preez, 2023). My 2023 response article (Du Preez, 2023) does not only discuss the issue of in/expressibility but is also an interesting response to an article and worth reading to think differently about the review process too. These articles, like the article I am crafting here, are expressions of my hope and a place where my philosophical im/possibility can be reconfigured. I am currently also working with two other colleagues on an art

⁹ The letter was a response to critical differences that the friend and I had when we were Guest Editing a journal together. The letter responded to some of the differences and addressed the difficulty of expression.

exhibition, where I hope to bring together some of the art I have created and that talks about my political becoming as scholar/activist.

Wondering/wandering with/out

Petro narrates her story of (re)turning to the feminine in her metamorphic journey of becoming-woman. Her autobiophilosophy is on the one hand, inspired by Pinar's autobiographical method *currere* (though not slavishly followed) and more particularly the expansion of *currere* to the notion of *ubuntu-currere*. The latter enabled her to narrate/theorise her becoming not as an individual subject, but a subject that is embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted. On the other hand, she is inspired by Malabou's theorising of difference, using the regenerative power of the salamander as figuration.

A point of resonance between *ubuntu-currere* and the figuration of the salamander is that becoming is an embodied process – that the body unfolds/becomes in intra-action with both the human and more-than-human world. In other words, becoming is as much a material as it is a discursive process – it is material-discursive. It is the oneness of the material and discursive that makes Malabou trouble binary opposites of essentialism and anti-essentialism, which is furthered with the notion of wondering. In theorising wondering Malabou (2011) draws on insights from philosophers Lucy Irigaray and Rene Descartes. She points out that for Irigaray, ontology and sexual difference is one moment, that there is no ethics that is not an ethics of sexual difference. Malabou (2011) notes that wonder (in French “admiration”) is the tone of Irigaray's theorising of the oneness of being and sexual difference. Admiration in this sense is not the admiration invoked by Petro in the ‘acting as if’ moment of her autobiophilosophy – looking up with respect to women scholars – but refers to a sense of surprise, astonishment. Malabou (2011) points out that for Descartes wonder is the first passion because it depicts what is our first response when encountering an object or phenomenon that is different. She writes, “...we wonder before judging. To wonder is to open oneself to difference before granting it a value or establishing hierarchies.” (Malabou, 2011, p. 11) And importantly, wonder means to open oneself to sexual difference. The latter is key because we encounter the other first through gender, which is neither determinate nor judged. It is this realisation that makes possible a return to the feminine without being essentialist or anti-essentialist, a return given credence in the autobiophilosophies of both Malabou and Petro. As Malabou (2011) argues, gender cannot be surrogate to one another, it cannot be assimilated to another. Gender is not only performative as Butler (1990)

argues but recognised as difference through material/bodily encounters of wonder. Malabou (2011) avers that because all subjects can wonder and therefore all subjects are feminine – feminine does not designate a gender but is rather the free play of genders.

It is not only Malabou who theorises the notion of wonder, but also the scholar of posthumanism Karen Barad, who invokes wandering/wondering (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021). Instead of meaning admiration, wandering/wondering has reference to imagination. Barad suggests that there is no way of thinking without engaging that which does not exist or without engaging the invisible line between what exists and that which does not exist. Barad importantly points out that imagination is not an individual subjective experience but a material wandering/wondering of an extended subject. Imagination adds to Malabou's oneness of being and sexual difference and invigorates possibilities for newness for the feminine beyond the immediacy of the present, although an outcome of the present.

So, what could wondering/wandering mean for curriculum studies? Early in the article we referred to ‘curriculum as complicated conversation’. In complicated conversations curriculum scholars listen to each other with the purpose of self-criticism. Although there is no judgement of the other, there is judgement of the self. Wonder could make us think differently about complicated conversations, such as encountering difference without judgement – a suspension of judgement to experience the first passion wonder – the beauty of encountering the other without granting it value. And by so doing returning to the feminine, which is always in the middle (*en milieu*), not essentialist or anti-essentialist. In such complicated conversations assimilation to the other is suspended and singularity preserved. Nevertheless, Malabou (2011) reminds us that for Descartes the correlate of wonder is generosity, meaning that subjectivity is not self-centred or self-interested but acts in the interest of others, involves giving of self to others. This resonates with *ubuntu-currere*, and by that, I mean that our becoming/unfolding involves acting generously to all life (human and non-human). Moreover, our autobiophilosophies are processes of generosity to/with life.

Barad's wandering/wondering resonates with Pinar's progressive step of *currere* discussed earlier where one imagines future possibilities self/other and understanding its material embeddedness with/in *ubuntu-currere*, which both embraces and extends Pinar's *currere*. Wandering/wondering could add yet another dimension to the notion of complicated conversation by thinking of alternative possibilities for the field and for the becoming of pedagogical lives. Imagination (a material wandering/wondering immanent to this world) reminds us of the entangled, indeterminate nature of our pedagogical becomings, and for complicated

conversations, it implies a further ‘complication’ of conversations. Complicating complicated conversations “through experimentation and intra-action in and as part of the world that we inhabit and that inhabits us” (Du Preez et al., 2022, p. 14) is important as it mitigates hierarchical, colonising power relations (Le Grange, 2018b). So, Malabou’s wondering (admiration) provides us with a nuanced understanding of encountering the other in complicated conversations - encountering difference without judgement or granting it value. And Barad’s wandering/wondering reminds us that complicated conversations are becomings and can be imagined differently, so that we think/act difference, differently.

Parting thoughts

Changing difference for Malabou is about thinking, thinking differently and about doing, doing differently. She invokes the figuration of the salamander to think difference, differently, and she finds inspiration from the salamander’s regenerative powers for the becoming of the pedagogical lives of women. Petro draws inspiration from the salamander figuration and ubuntu-currere to perform an autobiophilosophy guided by Malabou’s three moments: acting as if, acting together and acting without. In doing so, Petro takes a retrospective look on her scholarly journey, remembering first her early admiration for feminist mentors and later her struggle with debilitating patriarchal structures in the university and more broadly in society. But in these first two Malaboudian moments she narrates that she inscribes the masculine by admiring feminist essentialism (replacing one molar entity with another) in her mentors and through interpellating masculinity by performing it when engaging with the other. Her retrospective gaze bears resemblance to Pinar’s regressive moment of *currere*. She narrates her re/turn to the feminine in her ‘acting without’ moment, not to essentialist nor anti-essentialist notions of the feminine but a productive one that involves a regeneration of self in intra-action with others. Lesley theorises with Malabou and Barad the sensibility of wondering/wandering, and its productive potential to transform complicated curriculum conversations through (1) giving attention to difference prior to judgement (wonder as first passion) and (2) invigorating productive lines/pathways for becoming through imagination, that is materially embedded and extended beyond the human mind. It is a call for changing difference in complicated conversations. Wandering/wondering as imagination has some resemblance to Pinar’s progressive moment of *currere* when one imagines in unfettered ways future possibilities for the self.

We sought points of resonance (sameness/connectedness) between/among ideas from curriculum studies and

philosophy to theorise difference and to re/turn to the feminine, as inspiration for regenerating both the self (an ecological and not atomistic self) and the field of curriculum studies.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest

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