

BEYOND HERMES: METAPHYSICS IN A NEW KEY

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Abstract

The following pages engage a hermeneutic approach to African philosophy, focusing on the work of Tsenay Serequeberhan. At the heart of the discussion is the question of where to locate such an approach in the existing philosophical literature. Does this way of working render African philosophy a European enterprise? Giving an affirmative response, the writings of Paulin Hountondji, which draw upon Husserlian phenomenology, are taken up as an alternative response to questions raised here about the meaning and methods of hermeneutics. Ultimately, however, this perspective is also set aside. Instead, suggestions are put forward for the markers around which a contemporary African metaphysics, which is both restorative and creative, might be pursued.

Keywords: *hermeneutics; colonialism; time; motion; geography*

... I rationalised that there were only so many notes and therefore only so many combinations of notes, so it stood to reason that there were only so many songs ...

Scoby stood up, preparing to leave, wrapping his belongings in a towel. "Look ... you not accounting for time. Time is what makes music infinite ... See, if Charlie Parker had played Dixie, it would be like colorizing *Birth of a Nation*. It'd be a different tune but the same tune. You dig? You'd be hearing it differently and its meaning would change. Because a musician has they own sense of time and experience of time ... You follow? ... Once you put the words down on paper, you've fossilized your thought ... But music is life itself. Music is time. Played live, played at seventy-eight rpms, thirty-three and a third, backwards, looped, whatever. There's no need for translation. You understand or you don't. (Beatty 2017: 241)

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Please permit me the indulgence of a confession among strangers. Some time ago, I argued that colonialism is inescapable (Mukandi 2015). As I launched into that argument, I called upon Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994), pointing to *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*.

My focus in this article is on Serequeberhan, but it is important to acknowledge Theophilus Okere's (1983) *African Philosophy* as an ur-text of African hermeneutics. It is also useful to consider Sylvanus Ifeanyi Nnoruka's (2005) insight that '... Okere's presentation of his hermeneutics presents a unique difficulty. It is that of distinguishing precisely the basic contents of his [own] hermeneutics from the key players of European philosophy. More precisely, one can hardly distinguish Okere's hermeneutics from the hermeneutics of Ricoeur. However, viewed from another perspective, this shortcoming could be translated into Okere's unique contribution to philosophy as a whole. It is his commitment to the universality of the philosophical enterprise' (p. 142).

My argument is that this universality is in fact universal submission, oftentimes an involuntary submission, to what one could call a 'Western' order. Francis Njoku (2005) suggests that Serequeberhan and Okolo Okonda build upon Okere's work. Njoku draws from Serequeberhan the lesson that one must 'recognise that the hermeneutic method is part of the Western intellectual tradition and politics. So hermeneutics itself is in need of hermeneutics; hence one must be clear as to what kind of hermeneutics one is adopting or advocating' (p. 108). Much of what follows grapples with this idea.

In any case, in the 'Introduction' to *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, the Eritrean philosopher Serequeberhan noted that the aim of his book was to 'organically appropriate and indigenise *this* philosophic thesis from within the concrete history of post-colonial Africa' (p. 2, emphasis mine). In response, I find myself asking, *which* thesis is *this*? What exactly is it that Serequeberhan is attempting to 'appropriate and indigenise'?

With a haste and sure footedness that I no longer possess, at least not with respect to this subject, I claimed that Serequeberhan's 'this' referred to 'the ideas of European philosophers, Heidegger and Gadamer in particular'. In so doing, I went on to suggest that Serequeberhan skirts too readily over the tragic concession that he makes from the outset of his book, a concession that he *must* make. What does it mean 'to begin' with Heidegger and Gadamer? Can anything be 'indigenised'? When one covers something over with 'indigeneity', whatever is covered, whether it remains visible or not, both remains and precedes what covers it. An Africanised Gadamer is still Gadamer (Mukandi 2015, p. 527).

So I thought at the time. But is that really the case? Or was I taking the part of the protagonist in my epigraph from Beatty, prematurely settling into a fatalism that misses the wisdom and insight of Serequeberhan? Could the American jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker really have turned *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a virulently racist film, into something else, something different, something other than a site of self-encounter characterised by violence, dread or revulsion? Could Parker have done even more than that? D. W. Griffith's film transmogrifies Black men into horribly deformed monstrosities, but it arguably does something even worse to Black women: it renders them invisible.² Could Parker breathe timeliness into those Black men who arrive 'too late' to contend with Griffith's dancing light?³ Could Parker blow flesh onto those women stripped down to nothingness?

Or consider Frantz Fanon's self-encounter at a screening of *Home of the Brave*: 'I can't go to the movies without encountering myself. I wait for myself. Just before the film starts, I wait for myself. Those in front of me look at me, spy on me, wait for me. A black bellhop is going to appear. My aching heart makes my head spin' (Fanon 2008, p. 119). Working through Fanon's juxtaposition of cinema and war, David Marriott (2000) notes that: 'it is as if only whites are enabled and entitled to see their collective, narcissistic reflection . . . enacted in culture, on screen. By contrast, blacks must learn to assemble themselves before sceptic acts gushing with racist vituperation . . . the black spectator is reflected back to himself as, or by, the black imago passing between audience and screen – an imago which, by capturing his image automatically, virtually petrifies the black man forced to see himself in it' (p. 69, emphasis in original).

One further aspect of this confession is necessary before proceeding. While Serequeberhan (1994) holds up Heidegger's *Being and Time* alongside Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* as 'the two most important figures and documents of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics', the 'this' to which I referred above, the philosophic treatise that Serequeberhan would

² I have in mind here Jacques Derrida's (1978) claim: "If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid *the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse*" (p. 117, emphasis mine). My observation is simply that the violent caricature put forward by D.W. Griffiths may (granted arguably) bring about less harm than the invisibility of Black women.

³ See Alia Al-Saji (2013) and Helen Ngo (2017) for explication of the Fanonian (2008) idea that the Black arrives too late. "Too late. Everything had been predicted, discovered, proved, exploited" (p. 100). "You have come too late, much too late. There will always be a world - a white world - between you and us: that impossibility on either side to obliterate the past once and for all." (p. 101).

appropriate and indigenise, relates to hermeneutics specifically, with the work of Heidegger and Gadamer raised after the fact. Serequeberhan's interest is in philosophical hermeneutics – that which 'engages the sense of our mortality interior to the limits and possibilities of this mortality itself ... from within the limits of this lived finitude ... the possibilities of mortal existence' (p. 1).

Is he not therefore beginning with 'the possibilities of mortal existence', rather than with two German philosophers? Furthermore, is not an indigenous philosophical exploration of finitude the starting point of *any* philosophical enterprise that is meaningful in the place in which it occurs? In short, was I unjust in my reading of one of the fathers of contemporary African philosophy?

More than twenty years later, Serequeberhan (2015), in his *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy*, will seek to 'show how "Gadamer's work" articulates a practice of philosophy that is open to and welcoming of Otherness'. Furthermore, he attempts to 'reveal the value of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the interpretative practice of contemporary African philosophy. This we will do as it relates to African philosophy's own past and its hermeneutical encounter of Other traditions' (p. 74).

A Greek god

But what are we to make of this *hermeneutics*? What of this practice named after the Greek messenger god? He is Greek, but the Eritrean philosopher has this god floating in the heavens above, rather than walking the earth below, feet planted firmly in European soil.⁴ Hermes is cast as some universal, like

⁴ Some may argue that if Hermes' feet are planted anywhere, it is in African soil. Kevin van Bladel (2009), for instance, refers to the god as 'the Greek syncretic equivalent of the Egyptian god of knowledge and writing, Thoth' (p. 4). Van Bladel, however, goes on to distinguish the Hermes, who 'is often dubbed ... Trismegistus, the "thrice-greatest," an epithet in loan translation from an old Egyptian title of Thoth ... In this way *the Egyptian Hermes is distinguished from the mischievous Olympian messenger god Hermes of Greek mythology*' (p. 4, emphasis mine). Unsurprisingly, Derrida (1981) complicates this distinction: 'The subordination of Thoth, the ibis, eldest son of the original bird, is marked in several ways ... like his Greek counterpart, Hermes, whom Plato moreover never mentions, he occupies the role of messenger-god, of clever intermediary, ingenious and subtle enough to steal, and always to steal away. The signifier-god' (p. 88, emphasis mine). In a related footnote, Derrida also makes the following observation: 'As a messenger, Thoth is consequently also an interpreter, *hermēneus*. This is one, among numerous others, of the features of his resemblance with Hermes' (p. 88, n. 22). Derrida both shows the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between these two gods, all the while maintaining the distinction. Moreover, the framing of Thoth as *hermēneus* is a particular hermeneutical move - a casting of Thoth in the mould of Hermes; an overwriting or overlaying of Hermes onto Thoth - regardless of which is anterior, which is the elder god. It is a situating (perhaps an uprooting and replanting) of Thoth in Greek soil. It

the sky-above itself, that can be grasped or appropriated by the African in a gesture as legitimate as the German appropriation of Greece, enacted by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, among others.⁵ Is this Serequeberhan taking the part of Beatty's Charlie Parker, 'colourising *Birth of a Nation*'? Can one Africanise Hermes? Doesn't the Aboriginal writer, Alexis Wright, invite us to cast a suspicious glance at this attempt to colourise gods?

Wright (2006) tells of Angel Day, an Aboriginal woman who builds her dwelling alongside the white settlement's rubbish dump. One day, she finds a discarded statue of the Virgin Mary while trawling through trash.

'This is mine,' she repeated her claim loudly to the assembled seagulls waiting around the oleanders ... she knew that with the Virgin Mary in pride of place, nobody would be able to interfere with the power of the blessings it would bestow on her home. 'Luck was going to change for sure, from this moment onwards,' she told the seagulls, because she, Mrs Angel Day, now owned the luck of the white people.

... They would become like the white people who prayed and said they were of the Christian faith. This was the difference between the poor old Pricklebush people and Uptown. This is how white people had become rich by saving up enough money, so they could look down on others, by keeping statues of their holy ones in their homes (p. 23).

It is too easy to pass over this scene, woven delicately by the Waanyi writer and scholar, in hasty laughter. Yet consider the following equally telling scene:

is a work of colonisation.

⁵ The difficulty with this analogy is that the sky can, and in many ways is grasped by all. The idea of laying claim to ownership of it would strike most as madness. Yet this in fact is what has happened. All around the world, there are men and women in uniforms studded with medals who are prepared to go to war over the violation of their airspace - the portion the sky that they take to belong to them. That ownership is in keeping with the madness that is at odds with the 'lunatic reasoning' that Mogobe Ramose (2016) lauds. He notes that the 1979 *Moon Treaty* is premised on the idea that 'humanity expressly renounces and repudiates state sovereignty as the basis for claiming exclusive ownership of and jurisdiction over whatever exists (pp. 79-80). That 'lunacy' seems to have been put aside for the madness of national interest, extending to 'ownership' over land, skies and seas. We live in the shadow of that madness, and some of us come with our claims of a share in the heavens 'too late', given that the dividing lines have already been drawn and portions allocated. Thus *even if* Hermes' abode stretched the entire sky rather than being bound by European shores, it is not clear to me that the African could call on him with confidence, let alone claim him as one's own.

She had torn herself away from the statue of Mary, which she had now repainted in the colour of her own likeness ... Every bit of her time and attention had been given in its reconstruction, which had now departed from that of its familiar image, to one who watches over and cares for the claypan people in the Gulf country. Improvisation with Norm's fish colours and textures resulted in a brightly coloured statue of an Aboriginal woman who lived by the sea (p. 38).

Does *The Birth of a Nation* really change that much when coloured in by Parker? Even when appropriated and Indigenised, even if she were to be renamed, the statue that Angel Day appropriates and Indigenises is called upon to perform those functions that it is thought to have performed for the white settlers who brought it onto that country.

A legitimate point of contention might be that Mrs Angel Day is not adept at appropriation and Indigenisation. One could argue that it is possible to perform these tasks more or less well; more or less successfully. One could point to the uptake of various gods, their appropriation by other cultures over time⁶. But even if we grant that some gods can be appropriated and Indigenised, is this the case with Hermes, who is colourfully described by Bernie Neville (1992) as follows:

This slippery, deceiving, seductive, non-heroic character seem to have been the best-loved of the Greek gods, and perceived as the friendliest to mortals. He has many names and takes many forms: god of travellers, the god of shepherds, the god of merchants and markets, the god of persuasiveness, the trickster, the god of lies and deceit, the god of gamblers, the god of thieves, the god of illusions, the god of shamanic medicine, the god of the crossroads, the god of connections, of quicksilver, of fast footwork and smooth talking, the god of boundary crossing. He is the divine entrepreneur, a con man without ethics and without malice. He has no values of his own, no concern for substance. He enjoys doing deals, being clever, playing the game (p. 344).

Despite her advocacy for the 'stretching' of 'the concept of hermeneutics', Marion Grau (2014) notes that '[t]he modern term "hermeneutics" harks back

⁶ See Marion Grau's (2014) 'Refiguring Theological Hermeneutics', for example. An adequate response is beyond the scope of this work. I suspect, however, that such a response would pay very close attention to the distinction between 'appropriation' and 'adoption'; between 'Indigenisation' as an appropriative, active gesture; and 'colonisation', that process of being 'acted upon' (Fanon 2008).

to a cultural force field centred on Greek and Greek-influenced cultures . . . It is thus unavoidable that a Greek conceptual framework shapes and limits any inquiry undertaken in its name' (p. 80). So why enter into commerce with this deceiving god? What confidence can one have of a good-faith negotiation of terms and meaning with a god who does not keep his word (Fletcher 2008)? More distressing is the question of the scope of this god's power.

Here I return to my concern with whether or not colonialism can be escaped (Mukandi 2015). If Hermes is god of the message and of the crossroads, does he not reign from the instance each of us attempts to go beyond ourselves, or, to use a colloquialism which betrays an unfortunate acquiescence to mind-body dualism, does Hermes reign from the moment one attempts to get outside one's own head?

Drowning

Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera (1993) can be thought to answer the question as follows:

There is nothing to make one particularly glad one is a human being ... There's just dirt and shit and urine and blood and smashed brains. There's dust and fleas and bloody whites and roaches and dogs trained to bite black people in the arse. There's venereal disease and beer and lunacy and just causes. There's technology to drop on your head wherever you stop to take a leak. There's white shit in our leaders and white shit in our dreams and white shit in our history and white shit on our hands in anything we build or pray for. Even if that was okay there's still sell-outs and informers and stuck-up students and get-rich-fast bastards and live-now-think-later punks who are just as bad, man. Just as bad as white shit (pp. 58-9).

For those tempted to read the quotation above as the nihilistic ramblings of today's youth, it bears thinking that Marechera wrote it, albeit as a young 26 year old, around 1977. In *The Black Insider*, written the following year (although only published posthumously), Marechera (1990) casts this 'white shit' as 'the Indo-European river' which has inundated the whole world, so much so that wherever the colonised goes, 'some shit word will collide with you on the wrong side of the road' (p. 49). In one's own mind, and even in death, Marechera claims, we drown in conceptual, semantic and affective

feculence from the colonial centres.⁷ Is hermeneutics not a constituent of this waste? Is it not part of what drowns us?

Serequeberhan goes some way to answering this question. To quote from the ‘Introduction’ to *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* at some length:

The reader should not be surprised to find, throughout this study, positive references and appropriations, as well as critical rejections of the European philosophic tradition. For ultimately, as Cornel West correctly points out, this obsessive (Afrocentric?) effort to bracket Europe at all costs is itself a product of our encounter with and interiority to Europe. To be a Westernized African in today’s postcolonial Africa means ultimately to be marked/branded - in one way or another - by the historical experience of European colonialism. We should not try to “hide” from this all pervasive element of our modern African historicity. Rather, our efforts to surmount it must begin by facing up to and confronting this enigmatic actuality. This then is the hermeneutic task of this study, for ultimately the antidote is always located in the poison (Serequeberhan 1994, p. 11)!

I agree with most of the above.⁸ I think all of us Africans, all *les damnés* in fact – we colonised peoples who Fanon (2011) termed the damned – have been marked or branded. As Marechera points out, we are all dripping wet, soiled by the filth that unavoidably drenches us. Ayi Kwei Armah (1988)

⁷ ‘[T]he Indo-European river has neatly overflowed its banks and like the flood in the Bible has flooded Africa, Asia, America and all the islands. In this case there does not seem to have been any Noah about who built an ark to save even just two words of all the languages and speech, which were drowned. Literacy today is just the beginning of the story. Words are the waters which power hydro-electric nations. Words are the chemicals that H₂O human intercourse ... Everywhere you go, some shit word will collide with you on the wrong side of the road. You can’t even hide in yourself because your thoughts think of themselves in the words you have been taught to read and write. Even if you flee home and country, sanity and feeling, the priest and mourners, if any, will be muttering words over your coffin; the people you leave behind will be imagining you in their minds with words and signs. And there will be no silence in the cemetery because always there are burials and more burials of people asphyxiated by words’ (Marechera 1990, pp. 48–49).

⁸ It is not wholly transparent what Serequeberhan means in this passage by our ‘*interiority* to Europe’. If this is a typographical error, where the text should read ‘*inferiority* to Europe’, where inferiority refers to the economic and political position of African nation states vis-à-vis their European counterparts and the European Union, then I agree with his difficult yet sober assessment.

similarly suggests that the emergence of African subjectivity is tied to baptism in human waste.⁹ For Achille Mbembe (2015), this branding leaves the Black marked by the name, *le Nègre*, the Nigger, where ‘*le Nègre* is ... the ghost of modernity’ (p. 192, translation mine).¹⁰ Given that the strict interpretation of *le revenant*, the ghost, is ‘the returning’, what Mbembe is alluding to is the fact that *le Nègre* marks return of or within (Western) modernity. That is, not only are we marked, we re-call and make re-member our branding to those who did the marking. The implication of Mbembe’s account is not only that we are soiled by what we can metonymically refer to as ‘Europe’, but that we are so thoroughly soiled that we become offensive even to the Europeans since we re-mind by virtue of being bearers of acts of colonialism and their attendant ills. The African philosopher ought not to turn away from these claims out of fright, disgust, pride, or because one is wedded to a more attractive set of myths.

My substantive disagreement with Serequeberhan stems from his diagnosis. I do not think that our (primary) ailment is poisoning.¹¹ Rather,

⁹ Armah’s staging of the salvation of the African official and their subjection into person of flesh and bone is breathtaking, and calls for at least as much thought as the drama of salvation and subjection the lies between Descartes’ (1984) first two *Meditations*. The former writes: ‘We can go out,’ said the man, adding considerately, ‘if you want to.’ ‘Here?’ Asked Koomson, pointing to the shithole. His voice was filled with despair. ‘Yes, here.’

[...] It took Koomson some time to make up his mind, but in the end, like a man at his own funeral, he stuck his hand in the other side of the hole and touched the can ... The touch of the can had something altogether unexpected about it ... as if a multitude of little individual drops had been drying on the can for ages, but had never quite arrived at a totally dry crispness. When the can itself was shifted, a new smell evaporated upwards into the faces above the hole. It was rather mild, the smell of something like dead mud...

[...] He looked at the hole waiting for him with the powerless loathing of a defeated man, then he put his hands against the box, getting ready to push his feet down the hole. The man shook his head.

[...] ‘Head first,’ the man said. ‘That is the only way.’

[...] The disgust left Koomson’s face, and the resignation returned. With a small shudder he lowered his head till it was just above the hole, then in rapid sinking action he thrust it through...

[...] ‘Push!’ the man shouted ... He could hear Koomson strain like a man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he were vomiting down there. But the man pushed some more, and in a moment a rush of foul air coming up told him the Party man’s head was out. The body dragged itself painfully down (Armah 1988, pp. 166-168).

¹⁰ The original reads: ‘...*le Nègre est en effet le revenant de la modernité.*’

¹¹ I am grateful to Pascah Mungwini for challenging me at the Afro-Asian Philosophical Association meeting (held during the 2018 World Congress of Philosophy in Beijing) to think through Serequeberhan’s (1994) brilliant formulation: ‘ultimately the antidote is always located in the poison’ (p. 11)!

I think it is asphyxiation secondary to drowning. Were the correct diagnosis poisoning, some modified form of the poison may have been a reasonable remedy. But if, as I am suggesting the primary issue is an inability to breathe, adding more water, even if it's clean water, to the filthy waters in which we are at risk of drowning, is likely to worsen the situation. This is borne out by a closer reading of the passage of Cornel West's *Prophecy Deliverance!* that Serequeberhan cites:

While it might be possible to articulate a competing Afro-American philosophy based principally on African norms and notions, it is likely that the result would be theoretically thin. Philosophy is a cultural expression generated from and existentially grounded in the moods and sensibilities of a writer entrenched in the life-worlds of a people. *The life-worlds of Africans in the United States are conceptually and existentially neither solely African, European, nor American, but more the latter than any of the former.* In fact, ironically, the attempt by black intellectuals to escape from their Americanness and even go beyond Western thought is itself very *American* (West 2002, p. 24, first emphasis mine, second in the original).

Cornel West is at pains to make explicit the particularity of African-Americans, and the distinction between the cultural and existential situation of Africans and African-Americans. African-Americans on this account are not merely transplanted Africans, in the mould of Kwame Nkrumah's (1970) 'colonial student' and 'ordinary African' student abroad (pp. 2-3). The American in West's conception of African-Americans is not merely a geographical marker, but in a sense co-constitutive of the identity of the individuals described. West goes so far as to suggest that philosophically, 'American' is weightier than 'African'. Whether or not West's assessment is correct, the attempt to transpose a judgement regarding the relationship of African-Americans to American and Western thought more broadly onto the relationship between Africans and European thought is misleading, unwarranted, or perhaps premature.¹² Ought

¹² Referring to West's passage quoted above, Serequeberhan (1994) makes the following suggestion: 'In the context of contemporary African Philosophy, one needs only to substitute "European" for "American" and "African intellectuals" for "black intellectuals" to see the relevance for this [last quoted] sentence for the discussion developed this far in this introduction' (pp. 127-8, endnote 28). The trouble is that in the case of African-Americans, West has affirmed an 'Americanness' in a manner in which I suspect few Africans, Serequeberhan included, would affirm African 'Europeanness'. I may be 'Westernised', but I do not consider myself a 'Euro-African' or 'Afro-European' in the way that some may, and that West considers himself an African-American

not an explicitly African philosophical account seek to be grounded on African ‘norms and notions’, all the while attentive to our ‘enigmatic actuality’?

I fear that Hermes is no broker of a way out. I fear that he is our gaoler – the god of our incarceration. Is he not implicated at the heart of the scandal that is our branding? How then do we get out? What does a commerce in words and meaning that circumvents, subverts, or withstands Hermes’ reign look like? What are the conditions of possibility for dialogue that does not begin with and is not grounded on ‘Greece’, and all that the metonym implies?

Science

Paulin Hountondji, as I read him, has grappled with this question. He has sought, in the kingdom of science, asylum for us all from the injustices of Hermes (Hountondji 2002, Masolo 2010). ‘Being both object and model of philosophical thought, science is also the *telos* of thought and of the human life in general, the infinite task that gives meaning to humanity’s collective existence’, he has suggested (Hountondji 2002, p. 35). Husserl’s phenomenology, according to Hountondji - Husserl who was at one point Heidegger’s ‘master’; Heidegger who was Gadamer’s - takes science as its model and is thus potentially free of its particularity and its lineage. Science, and philosophy modelled on science are universal, applying to all equally, disinterestedly, in a non-parochial manner, or so the argument goes¹³. The emancipatory potential is striking:

The horizon seemed clear, once imaginary taboos that were placed on vast areas of philosophical research – judged too remote from African preoccupations – were lifted, as was the no less imaginary obligation placed on our young researchers to keep to Africa in their work, to survey in their own way, using their own conceptual tools, the narrow field that had been defined and mapped out by a long Africanist tradition (p. xvii).

The philosopher, in particular, could once again assert a claim for universality that is the foundation of his discipline, by refusing to yield to the temptation of cultural relativism . . . and by clearly acknowledging his vocation to enunciate propositions

¹³ One can appreciate the resonance of this view with Okere’s (1983) conception of ‘[h]ermeneutics as an *epistemological tool*, a *method* of mediation, and of making the passage between culture as lived and culture as reflected’ (p. 15, emphasis mine). Once reduced to ‘tool’ or ‘method’, one may be tempted to think of hermeneutics and science as disinterested, culturally neutral, apolitical, universal pursuits. It is a temptation that calls to mind Kwame Nkrumah’s (1970) image of neocolonialism as ‘negative action playing possum’ (p. 100).

that are valid across frontiers, that are true to all, at all times, in all places (xviii).

Given his contribution to African philosophy, including his contribution to what I take to be the ongoing, rich, productive debate and dialogue around exactly what African philosophy is, it is apt to think of Hountondji as the Bird of my epigraph. And I use Charlie Parker's nickname 'Bird' deliberately, to invoke Ramose's invocation of this current epoch as the African epoch of the birds.¹⁴ Yet no matter how majestic this Bird may be, my confession is that I cannot see a Husserlian project being colorized any more than a hermeneutic one. Nor do I see it as colourless, in Hountondjian fashion. The Husserlian project is a particular approach to philosophy; a particular conception of what philosophy is or ought to be. While science in the strict sense may be universal, or may aspire towards the universal, the quest to model philosophy on science is normative. It is one that, in my estimation, is moved by that current in which Marechera locates our colonial situation. I can understand how Hountondji's project might refurbish, refashion, rearrange, reformulate, reframe. I cannot see how it undoes our situation.

Now, I recognise that I may simply be in error, plagued by a lack of imagination; or in need of a closer, slower reading of a complex body of work.¹⁵ Be that as it may, allow me to conclude by sketching out the three markers around which this matter might be pursued.

Triangulation

First is the following proposition from Ramose (1999):

¹⁴ In contrast to ideas of an 'African Renaissance', Ramose (2003) calls this epoch 'the *Mokoko-Hungwe* period' (p. 711). *Mokoko*, he explains, 'is the Sotho language term for cock ... in many cultures the crow of the cock carries the significance of a warning or the fulfilment of prophecy ... In African culture the early morning crow of the cock proclaims the passage from darkness to light. It is the message of the beginning of a new day, a new life' (pp. 708-9). *Hungwe*, on the other hand, 'is the Shona name for the bird regarded as sacred among the Shona ... an indispensable point of contact with the ancestral gods: the gods who gave the land to the indigenous Zimbabweans from time immemorial (p. 170). The *Mokoko-Hungwe* period therefore marks 'the period of the birds. It is the hour to assert and reaffirm the dignity of the African precisely by seizing the initiative to remedy historical injustice with historical justice. It is the season of the return of the land to its original rightful owners; the period of reversion to unmodified and unencumbered sovereignty. It is the age of restitution and reparation to Africa. It is the age of African memory functioning as the critique of history' (p. 710).

¹⁵ This would be ironic given that my most significant non-African philosophy teacher to date has taken great pains to make the case for the imperative for *Slow Philosophy* (Boulos Walker 2017).

Instead of recognising only be-ing becoming, that is, infrangible incessant motion, language insists upon the fragmentation of be-ing becoming into be! and becoming. The critical point to note here - and this is our view as well - is that: 'Being and Becoming are not opposed to one another ; they express two related aspects of reality'. According to the imposed separation and opposition between be-ing and becoming, be! is order and becoming is chaos ... This kind of opposition precludes the possibility of the birth of order out of apparent chaos (p. 39).

Beatty (2017) is right to raise the question of time. Yet how do the branded think anything outside of the trauma of that branding? What does it mean for contemporary African philosophers to think time outside of the time of colonialism? Would one need to stand above time – above the time of language and the articulation of experience, to somehow overcome time, in order to think a time beyond that which has been imposed upon oneself? Must the African philosopher fly over time? Is the genius that Beatty reads in Bird a mastery over, or more simply, liberation from the ordinances of time?

My second marker, to be read through the lens of an 'understanding of entities as the dimensions, forms and modes of the incessant flow of simultaneously multi-directional motion' (Ramose 1999, p. 40), comes from Kwame Nkrumah (1970):

In a colonial situation, negative action undoubtedly outweighs positive action. In order that true independence should be won, it is necessary that positive action should come to overwhelm negative action. Admittedly, a semblance of true independence is possible without this specific relation. When this happens, we say that neo-colonialism has set in, for neo-colonialism is a guise adopted by negative action in order to give the impression that it has been overcome by positive action. Neo-colonialism is negative action playing possum (p. 100).

Temporality and motion seem to hold open the door that is potential. Some manipulation of the two, some dislocation, some dance perhaps, in, with, or against time may yet yield the overcoming of the negativity that is Hermes' gaol.

My final marker is geography – Oceania and Asia in particular. Even the most ardent African nationalist must recognise the degree to which contemporary African philosophy has borrowed from the West, for better and for worse. Lessons have been learnt. It is not for salvation that I look to

our neighbours and friends in the East. Rather, I am struck by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artist Destiny Deacon's (2000) *Over the Fence*. It seems to me that *vavakidzani vedu*, our neighbours, may have at their disposal philosophical concepts, frameworks, and paradigms which may be helpful in our various enterprises, just as we have some discursive tools that may be helpful in theirs.¹⁶

These three markers together constitute a call to articulate African metaphysics. The term 'articulation' here is philosophically heavy-laden and is itself in need of conceptual analysis. For my own part, I read in it a procedure located somewhere between Pascah Mungwini's restorative project, and Tanella Boni's creative work.¹⁷ Boni's recourse to poetry, as in *The Future has an Appointment with the Dawn*, is noteworthy. In the translator's 'Note' to Boni's collection of poems, Todd Fredson remarked that the Ivorian philosopher-poet 'is committed to the enigma, even the folly of language, as if the right phrase, like a spell or a curse, could restore meaning, could arrest the unraveling, the descent, the gravity that keeps pulling bodies into the earth' (Boni 2018, p. xvii). A similar impulse is at play in Mungwini's (2017) work: 'Can a tradition, deeply embedded in a people's language, in their institutions and collective consciousness, really die? My answer . . . is negative, if tradition is viewed as discourse . . . imbued with inbuilt dynamism and continuity.' One can almost read Mungwini's work as restorative architecture, the philosopher attempting to locate, repair, reimagine conceptual and linguistic bricks, refashioning the great house of stone at the core of his *Indigenous Shona Philosophy*. The difference between the Ivorian and the Zimbabwean has to do with the extent of the existing building material that each sees lying at her and his feet, and how much creative work each deems necessary. It is a difference of degrees, a matter of titration.¹⁸

It may be that over that fence, that one separating us from our intrusive neighbours – West, East – over that fence I might, gradually, learn motion, time, infinity, and freedom. Some might prefer that there be no fences. It is instructive to consider Derrida's concession to some interlocutors regarding

¹⁶ 'Vavakidzani vedu' is a Shona phrase which literally means 'those who have built around us'. It refers to those with whom one is in community.

¹⁷ It bears noting that at the same Afro-Asian Philosophical Association meeting at which Mungwini suggested I read Serequeberhan more slowly and carefully, Boni asked (and in asking graciously suggested) that I give more thought to conceptual creation. I am grateful to both for providing that productive tension, and to Oumar Mboup, *mon frère*, who similarly pressed me on this specific point in numerous conversations.

¹⁸ 'Vavakidzani vedu' is a Shona phrase which literally means 'those who have built around us'. It refers to those with whom one is in community.

the importance of sovereignty, in the midst of a work that deconstructs the concept of sovereignty.¹⁹ A time may yet come when there is no felt need for fences. However, as things currently stand, the very notion of ‘African philosophy’ seems an indispensable fence for African scholars and for African peoples more generally.

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¹⁹ Consider the following: ‘what is happening is so many events that are affecting the classical concept of sovereignty and making trouble for it. In this seminar, we are only beginning to reflect on, and take into account ... *what is happening*. On the other hand, it cannot be a matter, under the pretext of deconstruction, of purely and simply, frontally, opposing sovereignty ... There are different and sometimes antagonistic forms of sovereignty, and it is always in the name of one that one attacks another: for example ... it is in the name of a sovereignty of man, or even of the personal subject, of his autonomy (for autonomy and liberty are also sovereignty, and one cannot without warning and without threatening by the same token all liberty, purely and simply attack the motifs or the rallying cries of independence, autonomy, and even nation-state sovereignty, in the name of which some weak peoples are struggling against the colonial and imperial hegemony of more powerful states)’ (Derrida 2009, p. 76, emphasis in original). My insistence on Deacon’s fences, as with my call to work towards fleeing Hermes’ domain, these are appeals to sovereignty, geared towards the subversion of an existing sovereign order.

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