The Postcolonial Condition and Its Possible Futures in Achille Mbembe, Tsenay Serequeberhan, and Lewis R. Gordon

BENEDETTA LANFRANCHI
Makerere Institute of Social Research, Kampala, Uganda (benedettalanfranchi83@gmail.com)

Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophies*. New York: SUNY, 2015, pp. 185;
Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said. A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*. London: Hurst & Company, 2015, pp. 191;
Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015, pp. 274.

This review article puts two recent publications (2015)—Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophies *by Tsenay Serequeberhan and* What Fanon Said. A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought *by Lewis R. Gordon—in conversation with Achille Mbembe's renowned* On the Postcolony*, first published in French in 2000, in English in 2001, and here reviewed in the 2015 Wits University Press edition. The opportunity for such a literary dialogue to take place across fifteen years is occasioned both by the latest South African edition of* On the Postcolony*, which in itself invites a fresh reading of Mbembe's manifesto on postcolonial authoritarianism in Africa, as well as by the different potential outcome of the postcolonial condition that Gordon and Serequeberhan envision and propose with respect to Mbembe. I argue that while Mbembe's pessimistic portrayal of the postcolonial present is one whereby it is difficult to envision transformation, both Serequeberhan and Gordon's books offer a rich philosophical terrain from which to imagine possible futures, grounded in notions of dialogue and solidarity, that, however, vary significantly for each author.*

Key words: epistemic closure; violence; thingification; objectification; colonial; postcolonial; decolonial; solidarity; dialogue; future

1 Introduction

The three works reviewed here present converging—albeit different—responses to the outcomes of colonial violence and its effects on the current political and social order, with a focus on Africa. This review argues that while these three works present a shared notion of the philosophical underpinnings of colonial violence, they diverge in their characterizations of both the present postcolonial condition and its possible futures.

In this article I do not examine the three works separately but rather highlight points of convergence and divergence between the different authors. I thus do not aim to offer a summary of each of the books under review, chapter by chapter, but rather engage in a thematic discussion around selected, related topics in all three.

In section one, I start by looking at what the three authors identify as the conceptual/philosophical root of colonial violence, termed here as "epistemic closure." In section two, I explore the link that the authors trace between epistemic closure and the African

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

postcolonial condition, where the postcolonial condition is intended both as an existential state of being, as well as a political state of affairs, following the formal end of Africa's colonial occupation. Finally, in the third section, I explore the question of the future by analyzing Fanon's import in all three works from an anti-colonial, post-colonial, and de-colonial perspective. I suggest that while Mbembe's pessimistic outlook on the postcolonial condition leaves us virtually without an idea for the future and without a standpoint from which to reclaim the African's humanity against the dehumanizing processes perpetuated in the colonies and the postcolonies, Serequeberhan and Gordon's books instead offer a rich philosophical terrain from which to reflect on the possible "post" of the postcolonial, albeit with significant differences. While Serequeberhan bestows philosophy with the task of unifying the global, hybrid humanity that according to him shares in the condition of postcoloniality, Gordon maintains the Fanonian notion of struggle as rooted in the particular conditions of human existence, which cannot, by definition, be shared, though this does not close them off from entering into dialogue and acts of solidarity. However differently the two thinkers go about the idea of possible futures, what is important is that they both do this in answer to Fanon's imploration: "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, make a new start [*faire peau neuve*—literally, 'grow new skin'] develop a new thought, and try to inaugurate a new humanity" (quoted in Gordon 2015: 128). I conclude that these books are in fact developing a new thought with the Fanonian aim in mind, and that perhaps it is by drawing on elements from their two approaches that we can envision positive transformation.

2 Epistemic Closure and Colonial Violence

The term "epistemic closure" appears in chapter 3 of *What Fanon Said*, where Gordon defines it as "a moment of presumably complete knowledge of a phenomenon" that "closes off efforts at further inquiry" (49). The concept is taken as the point of departure for this article, as all three books under review posit epistemic closure as the conceptual premise of Africa's colonization by western powers.

For all three authors, epistemic closure emanates from the universal idea of reason that pervades much of modern western thought in terms of a single historical experience as that of the western world. This idea of reason necessarily forecloses encounters with *other* historical experiences, and has historically gone hand in hand with the negation of Africans' and blacks' humanity on an equal footing with that of western peoples.

In chapter 2 of *What Fanon Said*, Gordon grounds the epistemic closure systematically theorized at the heart of the modern age as western culture seeking to "become ontological"—that is, to equate being with western being. He situates the profound philosophical root of this attempt in German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel's equation of absolute being (which in Hegel means the subject's capacity of attaining absolute knowledge) with the development of western civilization, beginning with the Greeks and reaching its apex in the Europe (with a strong emphasis on France and Germany) of his time, the eighteenth century.

Mbembe clearly alludes to epistemic closure in the introduction of *On the Postcolony*, where he describes the insurmountable difficulty of the western philosophical and political traditions to come to grasps with "*the idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others*" (emphasis in the original) that does not deny "the existence of any 'self' but its own" (2). He further elaborates on this in chapter 5, where he also dwells on Hegel's phenomenological unfolding of "the spirit of the world" as absolute knowing that passes through the hierarchized stages of consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, spirit, and religion. For Hegel, recognition constitutes a crucial junction in the spirit's journey towards absolute knowing because to become realized, self-

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

consciousness must recognize other self-conscious subjects *as* self-conscious subjects—and not only as external objects, which form the primary content of consciousness at its first stage of being. This spiral of recognition constitutes the essence of Hegel's famous slave and master dialectic, whereby paradoxically the master needs the slave's recognition in order to be what he is (master), while only through challenging the master's power can the slave attain his own self-consciousness.

Mbembe thus argues that Hegel's philosophy links humanity with hierarchy, because "the *I* must be that singular entity whose peculiar feature is to posit itself to the exclusion of everything that is other" (192). For Mbembe, this is tantamount to the realization of one's own humanity via the putting of other human being(s) in the presence of his/their death—through the suppression of the other *qua* other and the absorption of all that is other into the I. That is because for Hegel:

> it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; […] The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. Similarly, just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other's death (Hegel 1977 [1807]: 114).[1]

The theoretical postulation found in Hegel, whereby the I is ontologically and existentially founded on the suppression of the non-I, finds its concrete expression in Africa's colonization by the west as an experience of suppression. However, unlike in the master and slave dialectic where the slave has the potential of overcoming the master, in chapter 4 Mbembe argues that for the African, the Hegelian hierarchical principle of recognition is altogether denied:

> By consigning the native to the most perfect Otherness, this [colonial] violence not only reveals the native as radically Other, it *annihilates* him/her. This is because for Hegel, Africa's cultures and peoples are precluded entry to the journey of the spirit, since they have historically never attained immanent differentiation or the clarity of self-knowledge (173).

This amounts to casting the colonized as someone who "does not exist as a self" because "the colonized *is*, but in the same way as a rock *is*—that is, as nothing more […] the colonized belongs to the *universe of immediate things*—useful things when needed, things than can be molded and are mortal, futile and superfluous things, if need be" (186-87).

In chapter 1 of *Existence and Heritage* (2015), Serequeberhan also traces the philosophical root of western political, economic, cultural, and racial supremacy in the epistemic closure theorized at the heart of modern western philosophy, expanding the critique beyond Hegel's philosophy to also include Karl Marx's endorsement of British colonialism "as a necessary civilizing project, in view of the anticipated communist future of humankind" (16); Immanuel Kant's philosophical validation of the myopic information about non-western peoples that was being spread through the travelogues of the time; and Jean Jacques Rousseau's easy conflation of a fictional state of nature pre-dating social organization and "the noble savagery" of the non-European peoples. What all these modern western philosophical orientations have in common, according to Serequeberhan, is that they justify violent conquest of non-western peoples by

> the workings of the dialectic internal to the self-actuation of "mankind fulfilling its destiny." It should be noted that in this regard that "mankind," be it in Marx as in all other great thinkers of the West, is an abstraction that is always thought of (i.e. specified/concretized) by reference to the West (17-8).

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

Of the three authors, Serequeberhan is the only one to make a direct and powerful appeal to philosophy to help correct the epistemic violence that the discipline has historically promoted, investing present day philosophy with the task of teaching us to live "with a minimum amount of stumbling and of violence" (5). He bestows a great responsibility on contemporary philosophers to inaugurate a new type of dialogue and on African philosophers specifically to "persuasively think through the questioning of this 'hierarchy,' the questioning of the prejudices and presuppositions […] that sustain the hegemonic hold the West has over us [Africans]" (37).

Throughout the book Serequeberhan maintains that this questioning be conducted also through dialogue with the western philosophical tradition, and especially with philosophical hermeneutics, which present the most viable opening for dialogue with non-western thought. In chapter 2 he surveys some of the major European continental philosophers to identify which are favorably inclined "toward the claim to humanity—on an equal footing—of the formerly colonized world" (4). Here Serequeberhan quotes from a series of interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, for example, which attest to how even the French philosopher, whose life's work was devoted to theorizing the ethical encounter with "the Other," was ultimately unable to go beyond Europe and the west, epistemologically, existentially, and thus also ethically and politically. This can be seen in Levinas' reaffirmation of western superiority, enshrined in phrases such as, "Europe, that's the Bible and the Greeks […] Everything else must be *included* in this. I do not have any nostalgia for the exotic. For me Europe is central (41)" or "humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance" (40).

Serequeberhan identifies much more viable interactions with philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo, and Charles Taylor, who clearly identify the existence of a larger human heritage beyond a Eurocentric stance and who, according to Serequeberhan, "endorse, against the grain of Occidental traditions […] the variegated multiplicity of our shared existence" (45). In chapter 4, Serequeberhan goes deeper into the analysis of the conditions and possibility of cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, highlighting the importance of Gadamer's notion of hermeneutics as *radical openness*. For Serequeberhan this is embedded in the German thinker's development of a philosophical method based on effective historical consciousness, which roots understanding in historicity and language as *lived events* rather than in the modern project of objectivity. This way of conceiving understanding importantly includes an aspect of self-awareness and self-critique as to every tradition's own closures and own others.

In *What Fanon Said* Gordon vividly brings to life the long-lasting existential consequences of epistemic closure through his narration of Frantz Fanon's tragic *vécu* of denied existence as "the black." Gordon's maintenance of the definite article "the" in his English translation of Fanon's French original "*le Noir*" (used to denote a person of color) is particularly apt at rendering the sense in which Fanon decries objectification as one of the most horrific outcomes of epistemic closure. Gordon aptly explains how this objectification is at the same time ontological and existential, since the negation of "the black's" humanity as an attribute of *being* is also a negation of his/her inner life.

In chapter 3, Gordon illustrates the repercussions of this phenomenon in the spheres of love and sex, through Fanon's harsh criticism of *I Am Martinican*, the novel by his country-mate Mayotte Capecia that won the *Grand Prix Litteraire des Antilles* in 1949. Fanon found the novel laden with quests for validation in its obsession with "white love." For Fanon the problem with Capecia's book was not that it narrated an interracial relationship, but that it posited whiteness as the basis of a romantic and sexual relationship, which for him amounted to the novel's literary characters actually throwing "to the wayside the project of love" (44).

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

Like Mbembe, Gordon offers an analysis of Hegel's phenomenology from the perspective of the colonized and "the black" as the impossibility of participating in the dialectics of recognition, since

> neither the Hegelian Master nor the structural White Man wants recognition from the *nègre*. […] [I]nstead of recognition, what the structural White Man wants from the *nègre* are *work* and bodies […]. Instead of labour from a human being, they wanted services from a *thing* (69).

This means that "the black" is cast out of the master and slave dialectic—he/she cannot even aspire to the self-consciousness of the slave because the master never needs his/her recognition. And by being cast out of recognition, "the black" is cast out of humanity.

Gordon shows how it is precisely the negated possibility of attaining self-consciousness in the Hegelian sense that ultimately pushed Fanon to conceive of another, different path to the realization of "the black's" humanity—one where his/her subjective sphere, the sphere of desire, could be reclaimed; one where humanity could be reclaimed in defiance of a structure that continually denies it and keeps it in what Fanon famously labelled "the zone of nonbeing." Fanon eventually overcomes Hegel by confuting the attributes of universality that are entailed in the German philosopher's idea of absolute knowing/being, which are those of a western civilization tracing its roots to ancient Greece. Fanon realized that it is only by dislocating the content of Hegel's universal that "the black" could have a chance at the universal.

It is precisely in his overcoming of a western definition of the universal that Fanon clashed with his friend and intellectual peer, the French Marxist and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, as illustrated by Gordon in chapter 3, where he re-traces Fanon's affirmation of the *lived experience* of blackness as a form of resistance to racism. The clash was set off by the introduction that Sartre wrote to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue francaise* in 1948,[2] the volume edited by Senegalese poet, philosopher, and first head of state Léopold Sédar Senghor who was among the founders of *négritude*. *Négritude* began in Paris in the 1930s as an intellectual movement spearheaded by the Martinican poet and political activist Aimé Césaire, Senegalese intellectual Léon Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. It reclaimed "black/African/negro" cultural heritage and aesthetics, later taking on a more political aspect with the fight for self-determination and civil rights for black people all over the world. It also affirmed and promoted African forms of artistic and intellectual expression as well as modes of knowledge. One of the central aspects of *négritude* philosophy was the rejection of what was perceived as the western civilization's sense of reason and rationality as the constituting elements of the subject's relation to the world, as these had been used by the colonial powers to subjugate Africans and blacks on the basis that they were irrational and thus immoral beings. These ideas were seen as enshrined in the European philosophical project of modernity.

In his introduction, entitled "Orphee Noir" (Black Orpheus),[3] Sartre describes *négritude* as a negative moment of historical consciousness where blacks focus on race as their defining quality, and which has to eventually be overcome in order for them to "'ascend' to a universal, revolutionary consciousness," which for Sartre is "the (objective) 'universal' struggle of the proletariat: in a word, Marxism" (56). His, for Fanon, was a dialectical reduction of the question of race into

> [a]n antiracist racism that was revolutionizing black consciousness as a negative moment of a dialectic in which the "universal" proletariat of Marxism would emerge through a cross-racial coalition of black, brown and white workers (130).

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

Sartre's postulate carried a triple fallacy. The first was to think that the colonized and racialized workers of the world could become wholly embraced by the category of the proletariat, which comes out of a profoundly European (and later, more largely, western) economic history and political experience. The second was to think that the coming to being of a consciousness that would lead the blacks out of *négritude* and into the universal struggle of the proletariat was something "at hand" for colonized and racialized peoples of the world and completely in their power to achieve, minimizing the structural role played by racism as a determining factor that cannot be bridged by class consciousness alone. The third was of course the re-affirmation of reason, history, and the universal in terms of the western historical experience, which in Sartre's case was Marxism.

For Fanon, Sartre's mistake was not that of casting "the black" out of history and out of the universal, as Hegel had; his mistake consisted in offering "the black" a chance at the universal only in terms of a profoundly western historical consciousness. Fanon felt this to be a betrayal on the part of Sartre, whom, in his words, the people of color had reached out to as a friend. The betrayal lay in Sartre's failure to understand "that he was in fact counselling the death of blackness through the eventual absorption into the light of whiteness" (57). This is a problem that has pervaded the European left that has historically manifested a closure to adapting the Marxist categories of class, state, and party to the struggles of race—but also of gender—as Homi Bhabha highlights in his Preface to the 1986 English edition of Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*.[4]

In chapter 4, Gordon illustrates how Fanon profoundly understood that the breakthrough at the level of epistemic closure went hand in hand with the demise of western political and economic hegemony, whereby "the conquering group's culture has to lose its status as the *superior* nation" (86). For Fanon, "the black's" entrance into the universal had to be *conquered* through struggle, and Fanon saw in struggle an infinite potential for renewed political identities, both for the colonized—who could finally exit the infernal dialectical dance of ungranted recognition—as well as for the colonizer. The Frenchman who joined the Algerian struggle for national liberation *against* France, for example, broke with the identity markers of race and nation to embrace a more inclusive identity, or what Gordon refers to as universal humanism, to which Fanon relentlessly aspired. Fanon also saw the Algerian liberation struggle's great potential in creating new social identities, as he observed among the Algerian women who discovered new and different meanings and modalities of womanhood through their anti-colonial actions.

Instead, the concept of the universal entailed in Sartre's brand of Marxism went hand in hand with what Fanon identified as the systematic ontological exclusion of otherness at the heart of the western philosophical theorization of modernity. It is from this realization of difference that Fanon also developed his own approaches in psychotherapy, which he needed for his work in colonial contexts, where his patients suffered from a series of psychic malaises that western psychotherapeutic approaches simply could not respond to. Gordon shows how it was precisely though his clinical work in North Africa at the time of the anti-colonial struggle that Fanon comes to understand that it was through the decolonization struggle that his patients were becoming "actively engaged in an evolving praxis of humanization" (93), which was so challenging for him to activate though therapy since "therapy was contradictory under institutional structures of dehumanization" (93). Fanon's realizations at the time clashed against "the presumptions of the universal scope of the sciences" (76), premised as they were on an epistemology that could not incorporate the gnoseological contribution of the *experience* of oppression within which he operated.

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

3 The Postcolonial Condition

> But how does one get from the colony to "what comes after"? Is there any difference—and, if so, of what sort—between what happened during the colony and "what comes after"? (Mbembe 2015: 196)

According to Mbembe, "what comes after the colony" has both important similarities and differences with "what happened during the colony." It has similarities in terms of the present political order, having inherited what according to him are the distinctive features of colonial sovereignty: arbitrariness and intrinsic unconditionality. For this reason, he labels contemporary African polities *postcolonies*. At the same time, Mbembe calls for a new conceptual apparatus to map out the novel dynamics of power that he identifies as characteristic of African polities at the "cusp between millennia" (1), one that has to go beyond the standard, binary categories of "resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony" (103).

In chapter 1, Mbembe characterizes colonial sovereignty as resting on three sorts of violence: first, founding violence, which underpinned the right of conquest and all the prerogatives flowing from that right; second, legitimation, which converted the founding violence into authorizing authority; and third, the maintenance, spread, and permanence of that authority. Colonial sovereignty as such was based on a *regime d'exception*, that in its departure from common law lacked any sense of "justice of the means" and "legitimacy of the ends" and ruled through commandment (26). Colonial regimes operated as systems of privileges and immunities that conflated public and private interests and relied on segmentary and arbitrary deployment of violence, which had the characteristic of erupting at anytime and anywhere, thus giving rise to a host of petty fears among the colonized population. In its lack of distinction between ruling and civilizing, colonial authority removed the native's possibility of claiming his/her rights against the state—his/her status as a citizen—ultimately maintaining the native "a stranger in his/her own home" (35). Finally, the fact that is some cases the colonial state relied on old hierarchies and patronage networks paved the way for "an *unprecedented privatization of public prerogatives*" and "the *correlative socialization of arbitrariness,*" which eventually came to constitute the "cement of postcolonial African authoritarian regimes" (32) presently ruling the Continent. The specific modality of power embodied in Mbembe's notion of sovereignty as commandment is what according to him impedes the formation of civil society on the Continent, as civil society requires "places and spaces where ideas of autonomy, representation, and pluralism can publicly crystallize, and where juridical subjects enjoying rights and capable of freeing themselves from the arbitrariness of primary group (kin, tribe etc.) can come into being" (39)—the places and spaces that are conspicuously absent in the postcolony.

The arbitrary regimes of privileges and immunities that are instead governing the African postcolony go hand in hand with what in chapter 2 Mbembe describes as the total demotion of state accountability. Historically, this demotion also occurred by way of international financial agencies' push in the direction of market economies and the dismantling of the public sector, bringing about a scenario where

> [t]hose who impose the policies are not merely "invisible" to the eyes of the population but are also different from those who must answer for their consequences to the people. And those who have to answer for those policies to the people act as if by procuration, not on the basis of that *sovereign capacity* supposed to characterize the state (76).

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

In chapter 3, Mbembe describes the novel and unique characteristic of the postcolonial political order—as compared to the colonial one—as a grotesque mythology of power that is shaped by an all-peculiar intimacy between rulers and ruled, resulting in a regime of unreality (*régime du simulacre*). In the postcolony, subjection ceases to constitute the privileged modality of power—as it had under colonial domination—giving way instead to conviviality, if not connivance, between rulers and ruled. Mbembe describes this phenomenon as characterized by a coupling of the ruling power's "own violent quest for grandeur"—which makes "vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence"—and the masses' "joining in the madness" to "clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology" (133). Such conviviality is deeply rooted in the economy of the postcolonial African state, described as a "trinity of violence, transfers and allocation" (45). The arrangements for allocating privileges and means of livelihood constitute a regime of social complicity founded "on highly personalized relations and on the power to distribute and protect" (48). Under such politics of conviviality, it is thus not surveillance and coercion that act as the main *dispositifs* of political power, but rather "an intimate tyranny that links the rulers to the ruled" (128).

Instead, for Serequeberhan, the African postcolonial condition presents the more classical traits of a re-colonization, albeit "under various guises and new modalities" (2015: xv), where "colonies are established in the face of their denial"—in the sense that occupation of peoples and territories continues but without terming these colonial conquests. This re-colonization is inherent in "the established interest of the West" that consists in the maintenance of "global cheap labor, unrestricted access to resources and markets, the free flow and repatriation of capital and a friendly environ for capital and its ventures" (33).

For Serequeberhan, the independence attained by African states has translated into a merely formal sovereignty, a sovereignty that lacks any real substance. Unlike Mbembe, who characterizes the power relations between rulers and ruled in the postcolony as novel compared to those under colonialism—and not always necessarily held in place by an explicit use of subjugating force—Serequeberhan maintains that "the officially free citizens of Africa, like the segregated—or better still, the colonized—are held in 'place' by the violence of the replicant elite: their submission is the source of this power" (112).

Serequeberhan's notion of the postcolonial echoes many of Fanon's own realizations "at the moment of avowed decolonization" (119) as described by Gordon in chapter 5, where "the absence of infrastructure at the moment of victory, both at the level of land and idea, leads to a neocolonial situation through the affirmation of metropoles under auspices of Third World elites" (Gordon 2015: 119).

The Fanonian notion of zombification plays a crucial role in the characterization of the postcolonial condition by all three authors. In chapter 4 of *What Fanon Said*, Gordon writes how for Fanon "a society premised on colonialism, whose normative social field is a racist one, closed off the future for the colonized" and that "without a future, the zombification of which Fanon warns eventually wears in" (91). Zombification is thus the foreclosure of a future, clearly described by Mbembe: "the natives no longer expect anything from the future" because "in Africa after colonization, it is possible to delegate one's death while simultaneously and already experiencing death at the very heart of one's own existence" (199), and by Serequeberhan: "Without a political voice the population endures in a state of limbo, a perpetual unease" (114).

Given this scenario, the difficult question of "how to bring about transformation?" in the postcolony gloomily poses itself. What does transformation look like under the regime of "the aesthetics of vulgarity," where the autocrat and his/her postcolonial subjects are bound together in a zombie-like dance—what Hofmeyr in her foreword to the South African edition of *On the Postcolony* calls the "mutual exhaustion between ruler and ruled"—and which Mbembe himself articulates as resulting in the "quasi-impossibility of revolutionary practice in the continent"

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

(Hofmeyr 2015: viii)[5]? Is the transformative potential of the Fanonian struggle still available in today's postcolonial world, under the present conditions? And if so, on what grounds?

4 Possible Futures

The notion of future is the one on which the three authors can be most seen to differ. While Mbembe's ultimately pessimistic description of the postcolonial condition in *On the Postcolony* leaves us with almost no outlook for the future, Gordon and Serequeberhan both respond to Fanon's call for the development of a new humanity, the "making of a new skin," though they approach this call in different ways.

For Serequeberhan, philosophy is at the forefront of this effort, for, as he vividly recalls in the conclusive chapter of *Existence and Heritage*, entitled "Frantz Fanon. Thinking as Openness," Fanon premises the forging of a new humanity in the development of a new thought. For Serequeberhan this "new kind of thinking" is one that is "attentive and open to the possible in that which *is*; […] directed by one sole preoccupation: global solidarity in the common concerns that constitute our mutual humanity" (119). For Serequeberhan the possibility of global solidarity is thus rooted in a mutual humanity, a humanity that globally dwells in the present postcolonial condition as one that is *shared*. According to Serequeberhan, the actuality of our world situation, our shared effective postcolonial history, is a *pasticcio* where anti-colonial struggles, the heroism of Ethiopia's patriots and of the Eritrean *ascaris* who deserted *en masse*, the heroism of those who resisted Fascism and Nazism are all woven together. It is this hybridized past that constitutes our shared existence, uniting us all in a community of experience.

Serequeberhan maintains that it is up to us whether to fruitfully gather this shared, hybrid net gain of our postcolonial present or to let it pass us by, thus missing out on the great potential of this historical moment as one in which to reject "colonization and its violent assimilationist project (i.e. 'a unitary centralized history')" and thus "the claim of a singular humanity" (49)—what in section one of this paper was referred to as epistemic closure.

For Serequeberhan the "flowing together, of critical concerns deriving from a shared global situation, constitutes the 'dialogue at a distance'" so that, "We have here an opportunity, as never before, to foster and cultivate the promise of minimally alienated intercultural relations" (48). Philosophy is to spearhead this dialogue at a distance where the future of the discipline entails a new way of doing philosophy, one in which western philosophy is conscious of the elements of violence and supremacy that characterize aspects of its canon and tradition. Such an approach calls for none other than the decolonization of philosophy as a discipline.

It is unclear though whether Serequeberhan is locating humanity's shared experience in a global struggle that still has to take form—in what would thus constitute one of humanity's possible futures—or whether he believes that there already is a (his)story of global solidarity rooted in a common, global struggle. For while in chapter 2 he writes that "The colonial empires, in receding into the dead-past, have left behind a multitude of cultures and histories, that, fraught with all kinds of difficulties, are in the protracted process of forming a new global community" (51), in the conclusion he says that "this then, is the story that *we* cannot afford not to tell and retell […] A story of solidarity, focused on actuating more fully our enduring *effective-history*, the community of experience, which is our heritage" (120). What is not clear is whether we already have a shared, global (his)story of solidarity, which it is philosophy's task to gather, or whether this (his)story is still in the making and it is philosophy's task to facilitate it.

The confusion also arises from the fact that the *pasticcio* of struggles Serequeberhan describes are all national or continental struggles, and he does not shed light on whether there have been any truly global struggles—especially struggles that have brought together the former

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

colonized and the former colonizers in a politically viable way, one that has truly envisioned a de-colonial future.

Furthermore, given that the postcolonial condition cannot ever be a shared one, as it entails systematically unequal and uneven power relations between different geographical and political entities, what still remains to be defined more carefully in Serequeberhan's book is the actual existential and ontological basis from which to conceive of a global solidarity and a world community, which his notion of modern thingification advanced in chapter 5 does not do sufficiently.

Serequeberhan draws parallels between Aimé Césaire's notion of *chosification* (thingification) of the colonized, Marx's analysis of the thingification produced by capitalism—and epitomized in the critique of estranged labor—and Martin Heidegger's idea of the inauthentic life, whereby man/woman is converted to a merely *instrumental* use of objects, nature, and ultimately other human beings. According to him, what Marx's and Heidegger's critiques share is "the concern with the reduction of human existence to the level of *things* (i.e. the presence at hand) that occurs in modern capitalist society" (100).

Here a critique must be advanced to Serequeberhan on two counts. The first is that in this chapter (chapter 5) he proposes a dialogue with philosophers Marx and Heidegger, which seems to stand in contradiction to his position in chapters 2 and 4, where he calls for philosophical dialogue only with those western thinkers who are open to listening to the experience of the Other. He himself in chapter 1 strongly criticizes Marx for welcoming "the colonial globalization of Europe" (15), and for endorsing British colonialism as "a necessary civilizing project, in view of the anticipated communist future of humankind" (16). The manner in which Marx still constitutes a viable voice in the philosophical dialogue he is conducting is not sufficiently unraveled. Secondly, Serequeberhan does not advance a strong critique of Heidegger, which is surprising especially in light of the 2014 publication of the "black notebooks"—Heidegger's philosophical diaries that reveal disconcerting anti-Semitic sentiments.[6] If Levinas is cast out of philosophical dialogue for his sectarian comments, why are Marx and Heidegger maintained and what are the grounds for maintaining the dialogue with them?

Finally, by concluding that the thingification that must be overcome is a global phenomenon that affects both ex-colonized and ex-colonizers alike and that constitutes our present day "hybrid intermixed heritage," "our shared *being*" (116)—is he not conflating the different realities of thingification, which is exactly what Fanon warned against? As already discussed above, Fanon clearly exposed the limits of applying orthodox Marxist theory to the struggles of formally colonized states and societies and to racialized and enslaved peoples. Fanon's take on the matter revealed the profound differences that characterized Europe's industrial laborers, for example, and the people of the colonies, who "were treated as sources of raw material into which to mix the labor of the workers in the metropoles" (Gordon 2015: 124). What distinguishes the "laboring thing" from the "colonial thing" is precisely the economy of *mercantile capitalism* that is at the heart of colonial exploitation. As explained by Gordon:

> Such a model privileged the urban and technologically dominant centers of Europe and in effect left the people of the then-called Third World to tolerate much as they awaited their modernization through which to encounter revolution and become a part of history (124).

Gordon thus traces Fanon's response in terms of "what could be called the black radical tradition"[7] (124), highlighting that: "The error in that conception of revolution [orthodox Marxist] is that it treats colonialism and racism as minor terms" (124). Gordon traces the direct link between the colonial and contemporary partitions of labor, whereby the surplus of labor that

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

was created in "the Third World" is now leading to "the return and increase of brutal practices of exploitation, including enslavement, across the globe" (173), thus highlighting the inherent *differences* that characterize diverse types of oppression. He thus emphasizes how racism, colonialism, and enslavement constitute a specific type of oppression that cannot be understood under the framework of a single, shared phenomenon of thingification uniting North and South.

As discussed above, it was around this crucial point that Fanon's conflictual relationship with Sartre was maintained, as Sartre had, according to Fanon, reduced the black racial struggle to a historical idiosyncrasy that would get dialectically synthesized in the world history of the proletariat. Gordon thus reminds us of Fanon's skepticism towards universal frameworks that by negating particular experiences actually end up defying the possibility of any real solidarity because they inevitably reproduce the Hegelian reduction of the Other into the self.

Though Serequeberhan is not speaking in terms of workers movements, but rather in terms of thingification as an *ontological* shared condition, the question remains as to whether "the enlargement and enrichment of our shared human existence/heritage" (50) and the "global solidarity in the common concerns that constitute our mutual humanity" (119) can happen, and on what grounds, given the acutely uneven distribution of legal, political, and economic privileges that currently differentiate the world's populations. The question is whether without a communion of material conditions and interests, Serequeberhan's "promising theoretic situation of the present" (48) risks remaining exactly that: a purely theoretic situation, without its translation into political action aimed at subverting not only epistemological and philosophical, but also socio-economic inequality. Though in chapter 1 Serequeberhan does mention the world's uneven division of labor, according to what he terms "re-colonization," which maintains "global cheap labor, unrestricted access to resources and markets, the free flow and repatriation of capital and a friendly environ for capital and its ventures" (33), he ultimately fails to qualify global cheap labor in the manner that has been expounded, for example, by de-colonial philosopher Ramon Grosfoguel (2007: 217), who argues:

> the different forms of labor that are articulated to capitalist accumulation at a world-scale are assigned according to this racial hierarchy; coercive (or cheap) labor is done by non-European people in the periphery and "free wage labor" in the core. The global gender hierarchy is also affected by race: contrary to pre-European patriarchies where all women were inferior to all men, in the new colonial power matrix some women (of European origin) have a higher status and access to resources than some men (of non-European origin). The idea of race organizes the world's population into a hierarchical order of superior and inferior people that becomes an organizing principle of the international division of labor and of the global patriarchal system.[8]

5 Conclusion

In the very last section of chapter 5, entitled "Facing Sartre," Gordon paints an evocative picture of Fanon and Sartre's complex relationship, characterized by Fanon's proverbial "disappointments with the claustrophobic, death-signifying dialecticism of Sartre's 'Black Orpheus'" (112), and yet ending with Fanon, nearing death, asking Sartre to write the preface to his magnum opus, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). And here, finally, according to Gordon, "Sartre proverbially gets it" (134). What Sartre, the white, Marxist Frenchman, finally "gets" is that "it is not hate that scares those of colonial mind-set. It's their irrelevance" (134), thus acknowledging Fanon's lifelong personal and political battle against "the pitfalls of recognition" (134).

Finally, *dialogue happened.*

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

Can this unfolding of dialogue between Sartre and Fanon be taken as a concrete example of the demolition of the tyranny of epistemic closure—denounced in the three books here reviewed—in favor of Serequeberhan's call for world philosophical dialogue? If we embrace Serequeberhan's hopeful appeal, we might even try to look at the problems raised in section three of this article slightly differently and read his appeal to philosophy as one of duty—the duty to take on the worldly task of bringing together under a common understanding and mutual recognition the diverse thingifying forces that are currently at play in the world and that characterize the contemporary global condition, which is postcolonial by definition, in the sense of unfolding in the wake of colonialism.

Still, the Fanonian admonition raised against Serequeberhan's hopeful appeal holds, because of the profoundly different socioeconomic conditions and power relations that subsist even among the most "thingified of the earth"—who are not thingified in the same way and thus actually cannot share one single experience of thingification. As much as an appeal can be made to philosophers to make philosophy relevant to the present times by conceptualizing connections across differences, the inequality that characterizes the present world condition can never be resolved through philosophical dialogue alone.

What a world-philosophies framework *can* do is to aim at theorizing that "human way of being" that Fanon so longed for and that Gordon so beautifully reminds us of today. This can be done by promoting dialogue through the acknowledgement of different world struggles that are based on the different political and economic conditions of the world's inhabitants. It means gathering Fanon's focus on *struggle* as the determinant modality in which the human person forges his/her existence. By speaking of objectification as a political category—rather than of objectivity as a metaphysical, epistemological, ontological, or existential category—Fanon situates the human person's self-realization deep within the particular conditions of human existence and delivers western philosophy's millennial quest for objectivity a definitive blow. It is only in the aftermath of this blow that a new dialogue can be attempted. It is only in aftermath of this blow that we can begin to theorize modernity from a philosophy of praxis standpoint that understands modernity as a diverse phenomenon—geographically, epistemologically, and politically. Perhaps this can be attempted precisely by drawing both on elements of what Gordon calls Fanon's "existential phenomenological social analysis that recognizes both the impact of the social world on the emergence of meaning and human identities and how individual situations relate to the development and preservation of social and political institutions" (2) and philosophical hermeneutics, as Serequeberhan advocates for, through which to gain critical understanding of the broader *traditions* of knowledge we are always steeped in as individuals, purging them of their epistemic closures that impede both intellectual exchanges and solidarities across traditions.

Benedetta Lanfranchi has been a Research Fellow at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) in Kampala, Uganda from 2017 to 2019, where she has been teaching Pre-Modern and Modern Political Thought.

---

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. translated A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 [1807]).

2 ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

3 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*. In: ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

4 Homi Bhabha, "Foreword to the 1986 edition," in Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks,* London: Pluto Press 2008, xxi – xxxviii.

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13

5 Isabel Hofmeyr, *"On the Postcolony*—A Foreword," in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015), v – xii.

6 Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings II- IV: Black Notebooks 1931-1938,* trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).

7 The black radical tradition is a political philosophy and movement that has historically looked at revolution from the standpoint of the struggles of the racialized and enslaved. The phrase "black radical tradition" was used in the early 1980s by American intellectual and activist Cedric Robinson as part of the title of his book *Black Marxism*, though black radical scholars are considered to include a variety of personalities, some of who also predate Robinson, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Claudia Jones, Ida B. Wells. The black radical tradition also has an important feminist component, represented, among others, by Angela Davis.

8 Ramon Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political Economy Paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2/3, (2007): 203-46.

Journal of World Philosophies 4 (Summer 2019): 188-200

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.4.1.13