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Self-realizing a lived existence in service of emancipation: Tsenay Serequeberhan's activist hermeneutics

Through his own activist hermeneutics, Serequeberhan crafts a philosophy which allows African(a) persons pathways to self-realization and self-emancipation from Western cultural imperialism. He does this through a unique reading of Heidegger to arrive at a hermeneutics of existence, and through Gadamer to posit a specific historicity which he calls 'our heritage.' This article first charts how Serequeberhan articulates these concepts, and then explores their prescriptive, activist intent. The upshot of this is a stronger appreciation of Serequeberhan's work and how it provides a fresh approach through which we can better understand existence in a globalized, post-colonial, late capitalist society. For Western readers especially, it offers a framework to better describe the relationship between, the self, others, and the historical interactions between them in a world fraught with enclosure and harmful ideologies.

Keywords: Serequeberhan, hermeneutics, decolonisation, culture, existence, Gadamer

Introduction

One of the greatest devastations colonialism ever wrought was that it denied, and often destroyed, the rationalities and cultures of the colonised. The impact of this "cultural bomb", as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o called it in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981), is still felt

today throughout post-colonial societies who must adopt to Western culture – including its political, economic, and intellectual frameworks – lest it be discarded or ignored in the so-called ‘global discourse.’ The question which has persisted within African philosophy since the initial critiques of Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* is how and where to begin philosophizing on one’s own terms when rationality, writ large, has been continually denied to your culture and community (Etieyibo 2018: 14-19).

For Serequeberhan, where to begin when rationality has been historically and systematically denied to you is through a self-reflection of how this denial has shaped your own existence and those within your community. As he states in *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (1994: 20), “in [Heidegger’s] deconstructing reading of the tradition of European metaphysics, starting from the lived ecstatic phenomenality of human life, Heidegger asserts – against the ossified and ossifying ontotheological conceptions of human existence – that human reality (*Dasein*) is not a present-at-hand substance or entity, but the lived fluidity/actuality of its own existence.” Or, as Serequeberhan continually highlights throughout his work, and with a perfect twist of irony, the starting point to overcoming others’ denial of your ability to philosophize is to think meditatively about thinking itself. The resulting contemplation of your own existence and your own being-in-the-world can disclose to you heretofore unknown possibilities of your world. Therefore, you recognize your own existence in its full, concrete reality within the world.

His concept of existence is neither existentialist (as in Fanon or Sartre) nor is it materialist (as in the Marxist-Leninist thinkers which he pillories throughout his work). Rather, it hermeneutically begins with one’s emerging self-realization of their own standing out (*ek-sistence*) from the world as-it-is (or comes to oneself). This allows one a clearing to see one’s place within history as it unfolds and also see beyond the horizons which were (post)colonially handed down to them (Serequeberhan 2015: 2). From this vantage point, one begins to see a fusion of horizons and the possibilities of a lived existence contrariwise to what has been handed down to them.¹

Complementarily, this article presents how Serequeberhan’s hermeneutics does not attempt to overcome Eurocentrism and its ensnaring ideologies, but rather accepts them as part and parcel of African(a) persons’ heritage. Therefore, the aim is not to ‘overcome’ Eurocentrism as such, but to activistly pass through

1 One could argue, following Heidegger, that it should be “the possibilities of a lived existence contrariwise into which one has been thrown.” However, I chose ‘handed down’ here since it falls in line with Serequeberhan’s reading of Heidegger and foreshadows his appreciation of Gadamerian ‘tradition’, which Serequeberhan molds into his concept of heritage. It reveals how one’s heritage is given to them through their community.

it – to debate it, disentangle it, decolonise it – in pursuit of uncovering other parts of ones' heritage which Eurocentrism denied, overtook, or sought to colonise as their own. Serequeberhan argues that self-emancipation from these forces can only happen through this existential-historical realization and through engagement (Serequeberhan 2021). His method therefore fundamentally holds a political impetus; he consequently does not 'break method' by moving towards the prescriptive, which would be problematic for Western hermeneutical methods which are based solely on descriptive interpretation.² Remarkably, his method is *inherently prescriptive*, activist even.³

I will begin unpacking this argument by locating how Serequeberhan's tandem notions of existence and heritage inhabit a hermeneutic tension: as one's self-realization of their own existence strengthens, so does their self-realization of the historical events which have shaped their existence. I will then show how this is not a dialectic but a tension through unpacking Serequeberhan's usage of Heidegger's notion of *Ge-stell* (sometimes restated as 'en-framing', or 'ensnaring' by Serequeberhan). This notion demonstrates the process of becoming a lived existence is not a synthesis between the two concepts, but an ongoing reckoning between one's existence and their heritage. Finally, rather than a typical conclusion, I demonstrate how this always already political hermeneutics is likewise always already activist through a brief case study of Serequeberhan's reading of Fanon. This open-ended conclusion shows how, once one sets upon the pathway of becoming a lived existence, they cannot merely stand back at a remove to the injustice within the world; they must run toward it in service of others' self-emancipation.

Ultimately, this exploration reveals three, important things: First, that one cannot merely disinherit themselves from their own culture's past; they cannot overcome history (or Eurocentrism) but they can critically deconstruct and uncover what it hides; what has been denied or concealed (or colonised) from oneself, particularly African(a) persons. Second, it shows how this operates from within and not from on high, or *sub specie aeterni*: one must come to these self-realizations on their own, otherwise they are merely and inauthentically replacing one ensnarement for another. Finally, it further emphasizes that, for

2 See Richard Kearney's work on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology (2004) which gives a cantilevering example who's hermeneutic operation is inherently descriptive: You can also see this in Kearney's own diacritical hermeneutics and in the authors whom both he and Ricoeur have influenced.

3 "Consciously and in a critical and rigorous manner", Serequeberhan argues (1994: 115), "[African hermeneutics] will appropriate and add to the *practical and engaged theoretic heritage* of the African liberation struggle. In so doing, it will become a *radical and emancipatory hermeneutic inventory* of our post-colonial African inheritance" [emphasis added].

Serequeberhan, all philosophy at its core is hermeneutical and all hermeneutics are inherently activist: just as one cannot overcome Eurocentrism's ensnarement from on high, one cannot interpret from on high either. Thus, whether one realizes it or not, they are actuating either a resistance to, or a reinforcement of, the concrete, lived reality whence they contemplate.

Existence and historicity: a hermeneutical tension

To set our exploration, we must quickly review Serequeberhan's notion of existence, which he molds and shapes within his hermeneutics. Though he finds that Gadamer is an improvement upon Heidegger, he recognizes that "Gadamer tames or domesticates Heidegger's position" and that "Gadamer fails to bring out the element of resolute 'releasement' which is central to Heidegger's conception of thinking" and, by extension, Heidegger's concept of existence from which Serequeberhan appropriates (Serequeberhan 1987: 59). So, in a sense, Serequeberhan's tandem notions of existence and heritage maintains Heidegger's resolve towards the world while also employing Gadamer's hermeneutics to open this world to new possibilities (i.e., new horizons). However, for Serequeberhan contra Heidegger, one does this to move towards the world itself, not merely to step back and let it open itself to *Dasein*; rather, actuation is essential for crafting an activist, prescriptive, and emancipatory hermeneutics.

Serequeberhan is remarkably consistent in his molding of Gadamer and focuses on three primary concepts: Gadamer's reappraisal of 'prejudice', his notion of 'effective-historical consciousness' (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), and his concept of the 'fusion of horizons.' It is worthwhile discussing these in detail before moving forward so we can see how necessary heritage is to existence, and why Serequeberhan cannot merely choose to be, say, a Gadamerian, and must press beyond his influences to shape a new hermeneutics.

Concerning prejudice, what Serequeberhan (2015: xii) appreciates is the shared pre-understandings we collectively hold "which are themselves not static but revisable – and indeed constantly revised – [and the] effects of this circular interplay" creates "an ongoing interpretative process." As he states in 'Heidegger and Gadamer' (1987: 55-56), "the consciousness saturated with history is not concerned with the methodical filtering out of pre-judgements, for it understands that it is only from *within the structure of prejudice that constitutes the present that the past and what it says can be heard.*" [emphasis added]. Clearly, Serequeberhan appreciates the historicity and pre-conditionality which Gadamerian prejudice acknowledges, but I also think one other, slightly hidden admiration is that Gadamerian prejudice (and, broadly, the historicity of Gadamer's

epistemology) requires no Kantian transcendentals.⁴ There is no categorization of principles from which we can deduce one's epistemic existence, we can only respect that one's knowing and understanding of the world is inextricably linked to the historico-cultural world in which they were born.

This leads toward the notion of 'effective-historical consciousness', which Serequeberhan (1994: 26) describes as

[t]he hermeneutical encounter with tradition [which] is open to the tradition's claim on truth. In this encounter tradition/history (i.e., written or oral past) is not muffled but allowed to challenge the certainties of the present. The interpreter or philosopher in this situation – the embodiment of 'effective-historical consciousness' – is in a questioning and yet released disposition to that which the past holds in its independence and the autonomy of its possibilities.⁵

The value he finds in this concept is its acceptance that each tradition has its own given truth claims. This opens further explorations of truth – individually and socially – by allowing for both an interpretation of one's own history while also establishing a conduit to engage others. "This 'openness'," Serequeberhan (2015: 75) argues, "is thus the tangible stance of a seeking that consciously owns up to and is aware of its own finitude and specific distinctiveness." It thus allows a person who "incarnates" this stance "to concretely recognizing the partiality and/or flaws [...] of his own historical heritage. It is this that institutes the space for the Other [...] to be a possible, or imaginable, source for a *different*, or countervailing, truth."⁶

In short, an 'effective-historical consciousness' is self-awareness of one's own historicity and thus their own finite perspective on the world. This allows them to recognize that they not only hold prejudices (which are essential to their own self-understanding) but that they can learn and appreciate others' perspectives and others' own historicity. Prejudice and historical consciousness thus provide an opening for future possibilities, which Serequeberhan will eventually employ to

4 See Serequeberhan 2015: 75-76, 84. Note that, Serequeberhan (2015: 47) critiques Gadamer for praising Kant as the "greatest philosopher of all time", but then goes on to show how this praise does not diminish Gadamer's surpassing of Kantian transcendentals. See Serequeberhan 2007: 6-7; Serequeberhan 1996: 336.

5 Serequeberhan is again very consistent with this reading of Gadamer, and he typically makes it the foundation of his projects, restating his definition either in the Introduction or initial chapter of his works. See Serequeberhan 2015: xii.

6 Serequeberhan is quoting Gadamer (1982: 238).

craft a concept of a lived existence which can pass through the conditions of the historical present whilst crafting a more open, more liberated historical future.

This exposes one to possibilities heretofore unknown to them. Encountering others in this more appreciative (or, perhaps, more authentic) way “is the actuating of the ‘fusion of horizons’ in and through which the acuity of understanding occurs, or can occur, as it sieves/sifts that which it encounters” (Serequeberhan 2015: 80).⁷ He also welcomes the “risk” involved since it “lets the past speak” by one placing their truth claims in jeopardy through such an encounter (Serequeberhan 1987: 56).⁸ In summary, it allows oneself to appreciate how their own life is conditionally and historically situated. By accepting this and ‘letting go’, being open to truly encounter otherness, one recognizes a “fusing of horizons” where one’s historicity is not static, not merely an object to be studied, but is living and ongoing; it has possibilities (both good and bad) yet to be realized or actuated (Serequeberhan 1987: 56).

Furthermore, knowing this gives one the ability to better understand other persons, the opportunity to reshape one’s understanding of their own past – things concealed, forgotten, or ignored – and, importantly, the impetus to actuate possibilities previously undisclosed to oneself. As Serequeberhan summarizes in *Existence and Heritage* (2015: 89), for Gadamer “‘true experience is that of one’s own historicity.’ It necessarily follows, then, that hermeneutical experience – *which is concerned with understanding that which is preserved and passed in and through a heritage* – in being, itself, within the real of experience as such must exhibit its basic structure”, meaning its own historico-cultural situation [emphasis added].⁹ Continuing, he states that this structure “must harbor and tangibly reflect the finite/limited character of human experience. *The stance it takes, toward the past and/or Other traditions, is thus an effort not to assimilate but to comprehend that which its on own and/or Other traditions harbor and preserve*” (2015: 90) [emphasis added].

From the above, what we can surmise from Serequeberhan’s Gadamer is that a better historical future is possible through an honest engagement (or encounter) with our own and others’ historico-cultural situation (i.e., the historicity which forms and shapes our worldview or *Weltanschauung*). Furthermore, Serequeberhan values how Gadamer employs Heidegger’s concept of the mind through the lens of a historical world upon which one’s understanding of the world is constructed. The past is always ongoing, it cannot be dissolved into mere

7 Serequeberhan is quoting Gadamer (1982: 252). Note that Serequeberhan often employs the word ‘authentic’ but vaguely defines it.

8 He repeats this appreciation of risk throughout his work, see Serequeberhan 2015: 79–81.

9 He is quoting Hegel (1976: 312).

context or conditionality; *it is who we are* (or at least who we think we are). For Serequeberhan, this is the linkage between Heidegger's notion of *Dasein's* concrete, and open relationship with the world and Gadamer's hermeneutics. Both are essential to recognizing the relationship between existence and one's own heritage:

In Heidegger's words; the 'effective-historical consciousness' (*Dasein* in concrete historical engagement) in being 'released' to the 'region,' is used by the 'region' in the disclosure of what it harbours. Which in this case is tradition as the historical horizon within which we live and think. The text or tradition uses the 'truly historical consciousness' to make itself heard. Thus thinking as 'meditative' or 'releasement' to the region, is the 'effective-historical consciousness' understood within the context of the problem-complex of hermeneutics (Serequeberhan 1987: 58).

Notice how, for Serequeberhan's purposes, though each thinker divergently engages the finite nature of thinking and understanding, both ultimately arrive at the same end: they each describe aspects regarding the relationship between self-realizing one's existence and self-actualizing one's engagement with a historically situated/conditioned world. For Serequeberhan, most importantly, *this is not dialectical: he is not describing a synthesis between the two which creates a lived existence*. Rather, he is showing how inextricably linked an *ek-sistence* is for hermeneutically appreciating one's heritage:

Existence is always actualized in a specific and concrete heritage. Existence? The word derives from the Latin *exsistere*: *ex-*, out, plus *-sistere*, to cause to stand, set, place, to come forth, stand forth. Based on this we can say that that which exists is that which stands forth. A heritage, then, is the sedimented layering over time that is, the life of a community – of the actuality of existence, which in 'standing forth' does so necessarily in specific and determined ways and thus constitutes a heritage, a certain way of 'being-in-the-world' (Serequeberhan 2000: ix).

For Serequeberhan, the lack of recognizing that existence is necessarily tied to heritage (or, put broadly, a historico-culturally conditioned hermeneutics) is what doomed the ethno- and professional philosophy debates. They never realized, as we will detail below, how their debate was ensnared within a Eurocentric ideal of what philosophy is (and it is not). *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (1994: 32) is the first lengthy test of his thesis and his appropriation of Heidegger

and Gadamer allows Serequeberhan to clear away “the dilapidating Eurocentric metaphysics” which he perceived to be the debate’s fundamental problem.¹⁰

Interestingly, note that Serequeberhan uses two major thinkers within that European tradition (one of which was affiliated with the Nazi party, even) to critique his African colleagues and present a pathway forward. At first blush, this presents a contradiction, if not hypocrisy. However, it is also something of which he is well aware, and he even uses it to his advantage.¹¹

What gives him license to employ such thinkers (and for others as well) is that he goes beyond merely criticizing or acknowledging his sources’ Eurocentrism.¹² Rather, he recognizes how all-encompassing Eurocentrism is to any contemporary philosophical discourse and, since it cannot be avoided, one must actively pass through this Eurocentrism (*pace* Gadamer’s risky engagement) in order to arrive at a disclosive, historically evolving truth about oneself and their concrete existence in the world (*pace* Heidegger’s releasement and meditative thought):

[...] I begin with the candid recognition that Europe has *de facto* globalized itself. Thus its heritage is part of our lived Africanness, a heritage we share in as stepchildren. [...] For we, contemporary Africans, are products of the world imaged in the semblance of Europe. Our present postcolonial world, in *effect*, is the uneasy mélange of those who engaged in the *mission civilatrice*, those who took up the ‘White Man’s burden’ and produced *évolués* and *assimilados* (Serequeberhan 2007: xix) [emphasis original].

This reminds me of the older debates concerning Heidegger’s onto-theo-logical critique of metaphysics, where thinking is grounded upon an unquestionable ideal or god which thus renders all knowledge through this its lensing ideology. Therefore, one either accepts, rejects, or reformats knowledge to fit within the ossified, unquestionable ground of one’s metaphysics.¹³ The dilapidating

10 Note that, even though he was writing this in 1994, he continues this critique against particular forms of African philosophy throughout his career: “The critical deflation of this self-referential authority, the de-structive querying of its pretense, of its narcissistic metaphysics—the theoretic linchpin of colonialism and racism—is also a central preoccupation, the critique of Eurocentrism, of African/Africana philosophy. For, as argued above, the end of colonialism calls for a re-thinking of the pretense (i.e., ideas and concepts, the prejudices and presuppositions) that *authorized its practice*” (Serequeberhan 2015: 53).

11 See Serequeberhan 2007: XIII–XV, 46–54. See also Olivier 2022: 538–540.

12 See *Existence and Heritage* (Serequeberhan 2015: 39–54) where he excoriates Levinas for his Eurocentrism, fundamentally undercutting both the myth of Levinas’s emphasis on the Other, and problematizing Continental philosophy’s myopic view of rationalities beyond its line of sight.

13 See Heidegger 1969; for an overview of how philosophers and theologians have tried to overcome this problem, see Sands 2017.

metaphysics Serequeberhan critiques is Eurocentric and, much like philosophers and theologians who have tried to overcome Heidegger's onto-theo-logical critique, there is little hope of African philosophy overcoming Eurocentrism.¹⁴

However, rather than overcoming this imperialized ideology, which is nigh impossible given its reach, Serequeberhan *accepts it* as part and parcel of his and others' African heritage.¹⁵ It is not about acknowledgement, it is not about overcoming it. It is about activistly passing through it and, in the process, accepting it as part of Africa's heritage. Doing so within an existential-historical hermeneutics allows one the ability to reconcile this historical factuality which construes their world. In so doing, it furthermore provides them the self-awareness (amongst other tools) to actuate their past; to rediscover, renew, reclaim, or reframe aspects of their history heretofore disclosed, colonised, denied, or otherwise debased.

One cannot be disinherited of their past, one must accept it. According to Serequeberhan, through acceptance, one can rediscover their heritage in a new light, thus changing their present, their future, and their future-past through *realizing* these fusing of various horizons.¹⁶ Through self-realizing their own existence within the vantage point from which they see these horizons, the world discloses new possibilities. His hermeneutics, then, is a process of thinking within a lived existence which, in short, 'knows itself.' A lived existence which emerges from this interrelation between *Dasein* and heritage, opening one to a broader horizon of possibilities beyond their previous recognition.¹⁷ Therein lies the possibilities of self-emancipation from Eurocentrism.

14 Note that much of *Contested Memory* explores untangling this metaphysical ensnarement. It is a critical, deconstruction of an 'icon' in European modernity – Kant, Hegel, and Marx – and Serequeberhan does this from a historical-critique of each respective author's assumption of reason and its underlying metaphysics. See Serequeberhan 2007: 12, 16–19, 112–113, 122–123, 141–143, 162–163.

15 See also Dladla 2017: 102, who employs Serequeberhan's 'combative hermeneutics' as a means of critically interrogating Eurocentrism: "African philosophy understood as a liberatory or 'combative hermeneutics' (Serequeberhan 2009: 44) requires our re-reading of texts: a re-interpretation of history, of social practices and concepts which is grounded within the African experience. This approach is necessarily conscious of the violent ways in which Europe centred herself, and displaced, dominated, degraded and distorted all that which was not European and has been in contrast or conflict with Europe – as well as the way this process continues today."

16 'Future-past' here implies that one is always already reinterpreting their own historicity and that of their culture. As ongoing process, one reinvestigates their history and finds new interpretations and narratives of events, new ways of understanding how they arrived at who they currently are. The emerging discipline of critical fabulation is a terrific example of this (Hartman 2019).

17 Note that this is *Dasein* according to Serequeberhan's appropriation of Heidegger, not necessarily Heidegger's own, rather distinctively rigid definition. See Serequeberhan 1994: 20.

En-framing and emancipation: the fruitful tension between existence and heritage

I will further unpack the hermeneutical tension between existence and heritage later into this section. However, for now, it should be clear that Serequeberhan sees all philosophy as fundamentally hermeneutical.¹⁸ Consequently, it is inherently political since it is from within our 'effective-historical consciousness' – a framework that is always already shaped by past and ongoing events – that we are able to think, to philosophize. 'The political', here, is key. What Serequeberhan does better than other hermeneuticists who likewise agree that hermeneutics is always already political is that he presses further: it must not be about merely recognizing bias or context within interpretation, as seen in Paul Ricoeur's *d'ou parlez vous*.¹⁹ Nor is it merely a hermeneutics of suspicion or decolonial critique, as seen in African philosophy, past and present. For Serequeberhan, a hermeneutics must also be willing to act as a guide to changing these political contexts through an interplay between one's own self-realization and one's critical examination of their culture, history, and thus one's heritage.²⁰

For Serequeberhan, what postcolonial African philosophers did, knowingly or not, was forget how ensnared within Eurocentrism their own historico-cultural situation was. Concerning professional philosophy's embrace of Marxist-Leninist thought and politics as a means of liberation, Serequeberhan (1994: 39) was especially polemical: "[this is] nothing more than a futile attempt to square the proverbial circle since to subscribe Marx's thought understood as 'scientific socialism' or Marxism-Leninism, one necessarily subscribes an evolutionary developmental metaphysics of history – historical materialism – that places Africa at the lowest rung of an evolutionary ladder of development and which fulfills its 'objective' and singular 'human' *telos* in the historic eventuation of European modernity" [emphasis original]. In other words, replacing one Eurocentric ideal (Capitalism, which was part and parcel to colonialism) for another Eurocentric ideal (Marxism and its emphasis on a techno-utopian future) does nothing to emancipate Africa from its Eurocentrism (Serequeberhan 2000: 53-55). Though professional philosophers believe they have found a pathway to emancipation through critiquing the Eurocentric nature of ethnophilosophy, they either fail to see the ways in which their remedies mimic European ideals or ignore the problem altogether so as to be a part of the 'professional' conversation that is academic philosophy (Serequeberhan 2000: 1-3, 37-39).

18 See Olivier 2022: 534.

19 See Serequeberhan 1994: 20-21. For a strong, African appraisal of this Western tradition alongside Serequeberhan's critique of historicity within hermeneutics, see especially Fayemi 2016: 3-6, 8.

20 For others who are engaging hermeneutics and activism from a different yet at times overlapping perspective, see Eietyibo 2016; Sands 2019; Mills 2020.

The question becomes, then, how do we reflect upon the historico-cultural ways in which our thinking is enclosed? If we are to actively enact a self-reflection upon the ways in which the world shapes our thinking, and our concretely real existence within that world, what resources do we have to recognize the borders which conceal possible horizons and potential pathways to self-emancipation? To answer this, Serequeberhan employs Heidegger's notion of *Ge-stell* (also called en-framing or ensnaring in his work). Through the concept of *Ge-stell*, Serequeberhan sees a way to break through Eurocentrism's epistemic closure, a closure which has globalized itself to become the lens through which all persons and cultures see and understand their world.²¹

Note that Heidegger employs his concept of *Ge-stell* in his critique of technology to highlight how scientific-calculative thinking (and, subsequently, its ontological metaphysics) shapes our understanding of the world. Resultantly, it informs how we engage that world; how we employ concepts/items/persons within that world for our own ends (Heidegger 1977). It renders out the other possible understandings and meanings that these concepts/items/persons may have within themselves, placing them in a given situation, typically a situation used to one's advantage or otherwise seen as scientific-calculative problemata to overcome so that one can achieve their endgame. Seen in a technocratic light, for example, a forest becomes timber, with all its possible beauty, ecology, and other promises for life rendered out. Persons become 'human resources' or 'manpower' – at its worst, 'soldiers' – which can be employed as means to an end. Concerning other cultures, rather than seeing them through the possibilities of an authentic encounter, one sees them as competition or as potential human capital to employ at one's own service. In short, through the concept of *Ge-stell*, Heidegger locates how we shape or see the world to our advantage and the role that technology plays (be it a missile, a computer, or a pen) in this process.

Recall the quote above concerning Serequeberhan's worry about Marxist-Leninism's reliance upon development as the eventuation of European modernity, not an emancipation from it. Here, one can see how this concern is integral to Serequeberhan's hermeneutics:

To paraphrase Heidegger, 'development' is the global *Ge-stell* (en-framing) of modern technology playing itself out and being manifested as the perpetuation of European modernity's cultural and technological dominance of the Earth. It is this *Ge-stell* of European dominance, manifested as the 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of science and technology, that Africa must overcome in order to reclaim and carve out the existential, historical space in which to ground its freedom (Serequeberhan 1994: 40).

21 For more on epistemic closure, see Gordon 2015: 49.

Ge-stell functions as the intellectual operation through which metaphysics' onto-theological nature categorizes and shapes knowledge; effectively becoming the intellectual muscle, if you will, through which people justify the subjugation of the world into their own making. This includes persons, animals, and nature. Furthermore, according to Serequeberhan, it articulates the "thingification" of African persons: for centuries, Africans were seen merely as tools or commodities discovered by Europe, exploited for Europe, and this process continues to this day.²² En-framing therefore describes how one situates nature and others as materials to master the world around them, intellectually justifying their actions, even at times fashioning them as theologically righteous or politically necessary (as seen in the concept of 'White man's burden').

In *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, Serequeberhan appropriates *Ge-stell* to illuminate how both ethno- and professional philosophers participated, and even propelled, this process: it was because they failed to see how their debates were always already en-framed from within a Eurocentric notion of what is – and is not – philosophy. Furthermore, this oversight not only failed African intellectual thought, it enhanced Eurocentrism's control over Africa and its people and cultures:

Seen from the perspective of Heidegger's Being-question, and the grounding ontic-ontological destructive analysis that derives from it, the modern world is caught in the snare of the *Ge-stell* (en-framing) of modern technology. [...] We too – the ex-colonial subjects of this ensnared and ensnaring Europe – suffer from this *Ge-stell*. But for us this situation of en-framing is mediated, instituted, and imposed through the persistence of neocolonialism as the continued intrusion of European hegemony in present-day Africa (Serequeberhan 1994: 20-21).

In response to this crisis, he states that African philosophy needs a stronger grasp of its own historico-cultural situatedness. It needs a thoroughgoing historical-hermeneutical awareness, which Serequeberhan hopes to provide:

In this regard, the hermeneutics of contemporary African philosophy or African philosophical hermeneutics is a thinking of new beginnings born out of our political 'emancipation' and the historical and political crisis of European modernity – the long-awaited weakening, if not demise, of our subjugators. [...] In other words, the philosophic discourse does not just happen; rather, it is the articulation of reflective concerns interior to a negativity

22 We should also, by extension, include Western countries in this analysis; see Serequeberhan 2015: 101-116; Serequeberhan 1994: 68-73.

arising out of the horizon of a specific cultural and historical totality within which it is located and framed (Serequeberhan 1994: 24).

In sum, Serequeberhan's problem with postcolonial, African philosophy is that – whether from one side or the other – it unthinkingly always already reflected European ideals. Ethnophilosophers, knowingly or not, crafted their work in reflection of European rationality; often writing for a European audience, even. Professional philosophers did the same when they tried to present themselves as 'real philosophers' (i.e., professional academics) because they engaged in 'traditional' philosophical questions. However, it just so happened that this tradition was always European, whereby these philosophers treated Africa as a "geographic designation," as if it were just south of France and not concerned with real, African-centric problems, contexts, and histories (Serequeberhan 1994: 5).

This, in and of itself, is not a new observation, and indeed it was a critique African philosophers charged against others often. Importantly, though, neither side could not do otherwise since they were always ensnared in a tacitly suffocating Eurocentric ideal of what is and is not philosophy, what stands as reason and rationality. What is new, though, is that Serequeberhan shows that these philosophies *and* their critiques failed to recognize the ensnarement within which their debates were held. Through *Ge-stell*, and eventually his tensive notions of existence and heritage, Serequeberhan hopes for a reckoning with this ensnarement; a detangling, if you will, of what it has done but without looking away from its destruction. One cannot ignore it; one cannot proceed as if it is over or try to go back to before it happened. One must accept it as part of their heritage. For Westerners, by the way, this means acknowledging one's complicity in this history: whether one was directly involved does not matter, all Westerners (especially white men, such as myself) have benefitted one way or the other from this Eurocentrism.

Returning to his analysis and critique, to my mind, it covalently folds into Ngugi Wa Thiongo's sentiments in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981). Therein, Ngugi (1981: 3) stresses that colonialism enforced a mindset whereby "it makes [the colonised] see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement [...] Amidst this wasteland which it has created, imperialism [i.e., colonialism, Eurocentrism] presents itself as the cure and demands the dependent sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: 'theft is holy.'" I think this coalesces with Serequeberhan's hermeneutics since his notion of a lived existence is one that is aware of this ensnarement, both its historical employment and its present operation. Furthermore, rather than forget it or otherwise attempt to jettison it from one's remembrance of the past, a

lived existence directly confronts it – almost Dionysian-like à la Nietzsche – so as to reckon with what it has done, what it is doing, and how such a lived existence can move beyond it.

Recall that one cannot be disinherited from their heritage. The past will not pass, it lingers and shapes our thinking whether we recognize it or not. Here lies the hermeneutical tension between existence and heritage: they cannot be reconciled or synthesized, nor can they stand forth by themselves. *Ek-sistence*, standing forth, needs to understand the world upon which and through which it stands. *Ek-sistence* cannot fully realize its possibilities and take hold of its concrete reality (*Dasein*) as its own unless it reckons with its world, and that world's history. Countervailingly, merely acknowledging the history of the world – say, as seen in typical historical-critical hermeneutics – is not enough to fully emancipate oneself from the ensnarement(s) within that history and the world created by/through that history. A decolonial critique, for example, is merely a description of what has happened and does nothing to liberate others unless it is pressed into service of liberation; that does not happen unless someone stands forth and makes a change in course.

This tension is necessary for both existence and heritage (as concepts and potentiates to enact a better reality). It also is necessary for any self-realization or communal-realization to bear any fruit: for Serequeberhan, we need people to stand forth, to express their *ek-sistence* and not look away from the past. Those who can find new possibilities to change theirs and their communities' present circumstances.

Yet still, returning to the problem of overcoming Eurocentrism and its metaphysics, one could argue that we are merely replacing one frame for another, which is exactly what Serequeberhan critiques Hountondji and other professional philosophers of doing. However, the key is that a lived existence arises from the self-awareness of both one's concrete reality (existence), the history which shaped it (heritage), and how one must press this in service toward a better, more emancipated future. Put this way, a lived existence opens new horizons, new possibilities, new engagements with others. It opens new means of critical self-reflection and new pathways toward shaping a more emancipated culture.

It may be impossible not to fall into an ensnarement or to think outside of some organizing, epistemic principle (which, at its core, is a metaphysics). However, *knowing this*, and exploring the historicity through and by which we know this, gives us the possibility of choosing which organizing principle is the most liberating. In the future, new horizons may open with new principles chosen.

The imperative is who decides, and if one can decide for themselves. That is the emancipation: not from all organizing principles and their framing of knowledge, but from the denial of choosing one's own path alongside their communities through which they historically share a heritage. For Serequeberhan (2015: 118-119), this is his dream for African philosophy:

What we take out and leave behind is thus sifted by a lived and constantly augmented heritage – instantiated in our 'effective-historical consciousness' – focused on the reciprocal enhancing of our shared existence. Thus, being open to the possible, in the actuality of the present, we solicit and call forth a new and shared world. In this, as in the past, we will invent. But this time around tempered by the surpassed pitfalls of what we have come to see as dead ends (Senghor's *Africanité*, for example) and focused on solidarities – nurtured by mutual concerns – which have overcome the delusion of thinking that they possess, or that it is possible to possess, a foolproof system, *metaphysics*, to guard against the risks of inventing. This, then, is the treasured intellectual-political inheritance of humanity (Serequeberhan 2015: 118-119) [emphasis original].

The pathway forward for a philosophy – African or otherwise – is thus not to ignore the racist sections of, say, Hegel or Heidegger, nor the intellectual misfires as he sees in *Africanité* or *Négritude*, but to directly confront them. For *all philosophers*, not just Africans, a lived existence which engages these historical problematics recognizes what has been denied to them: the more just, more open, and more honest regions of truth that these epistemic closures hid under provisos such as the *mission civilatrice*. Through this, they also rediscover what has been given to them, albeit under the cover of darkness. Uncovering and/or rediscovering these regions is a revelation of pasts heretofore unknown to such a lived existence: stories of persons and communities – and their cultures and heritages – that reawaken new ideas, new appreciations, and new horizons through which they may engage the world.

A concluding case study: Frantz Fanon's lived existence

Thus far in this article, I have unpacked Serequeberhan's historical, hermeneutical awareness through engaging his shaping of Gadamerian concepts in pursuit of his own philosophy. Along with his unique appropriation of Heidegger, what emerges from this shaping is his tandem notions of existence and heritage, and how they are held in hermeneutic tension so as to clear a space for a lived existence to form from within oneself. The first section detailed this tension and why it is hermeneutically necessary.

The second section delved further by exploring the ways Serequeberhan appropriates Heidegger's critique of technology and his notion of *Ge-stell*. Through this appropriation, Serequeberhan articulates the ways in which our intellectual debates (African or otherwise) are always already en-framed within a Eurocentric model. Finally, I argued that Serequeberhan's hermeneutics does not try to overcome this en-framing from on high; he does not try to bypass it, find a way around it, nor believe we can think *sub specie aeterni*. Rather, he critically engages it: risking that such an engagement would allow a lived existence to fully arise from within oneself which consequently emancipates said lived existence and, hopefully, is pressed into the service of emancipating others.

Yet still, we must recall that contrary to most Western hermeneutic models, Serequeberhan's hermeneutics is activist and inherently prescriptive. Consequently, this means that there needs to be a practical or pragmatic element to Serequeberhan's over-arching project. I cannot think of a better way to highlight this pragmatism than through his reading and use of Fanon: it at once gives a clear example of a lived existence for Serequeberhan (thus bringing together all the ideas discussed above) while also providing a model for others to follow. Therefore, I will close with a very brief look at how Serequeberhan's reading of Fanon embodies a lived existence.

Interestingly, Serequeberhan rarely, if ever, directly engages Fanon's existentialism through phenomenology.²³ Obviously, Serequeberhan knows and mentions these aspects, and the final chapters of *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* details the diagnostics given to us through Fanon, along with Marcién Towa and Amílcal Cabral.²⁴ Notably, though, Serequeberhan continually stresses Fanon's critique while distancing it from any Sartrean influence or any other phenomenological inquiry.²⁵ To me, this furthers the notion that Serequeberhan is giving a hermeneutic reading of Fanon and his work – same as he did to Heidegger and Gadamer – and that Serequeberhan is more interested in Fanon as a 'lived existence who decolonizes' than Fanon as 'existential phenomenologist who conceptualizes decolonisation.'

23 See Serequeberhan 1994: 6–9.

24 Space prevents me from going in-depth on Cabral and Towa's influence, but it is well worth noting for future research. For Cabral's influence see Serequeberhan 1994: 105–110, 112, 118. For Marcién Towa, note that Serequeberhan's *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (1994: 7) employs Marcién Towa's critical examination of African philosophy and he also ends his final chapter, 'The Liberation Struggle', with a reflection upon Towa's overview of African philosophy's true commitments (1994: 114). See also Serequeberhan's *Contested Memory* (2007: 2, 16–17) where Towa plays a major diagnostic-hermeneutic role in assessing Eurocentrism's effects on African philosophy; note that on Chapter 3, 'The idea as colonizer', begins with an epigraph from Towa (2007: 63).

25 See Serequeberhan 2000: 19–20.

Serequeberhan employs Fanon's diagnostics but also highlights throughout his work that Fanon exemplifies a lived existence which knows itself and that this self-knowledge has been framed/shaped/molded through its historicity. Thus, it is not about the methods Fanon uses when engaging postcolonialism, it is about how, from within himself, he comes to fully realize his own existence and heritage. This can be seen in Serequeberhan's presentation of heritage as an ongoing question (and opportunity) in the opening chapter of *Our Heritage* (2000), entitled 'Heritage and its transmission: a reading of Frantz Fanon':

[...] this lost possibility – defeated through and in victory – that defines postcolonial Africa is the ground from which arises the anguished question of heritage. Towa points out, in synchrony with Fanon, this 'zone de non être': "The anguished conscience of our identity is in reality the consciousness of the lost of identity under the dissolving action of external forces which we have not succeeded in controlling." Thus, to properly respond to Fanon's call is to overcome the ground of this malaise – in effect, to reclaim and solidate that fleeting moment in modern African history, when the enigma of our heritage was momentarily dissolved, to reclaim and anew consolidate that moment in modern African history – defeated in and through victory – which makes us worthy of questioning the question of our heritage. *This is what Fanon calls us to* (Serequeberhan 2000: 8) [emphasis added].

He continues from this to lay out how Fanon's self-reflection upon him being "an 'ex-'native'" and its resulting effects on his own personhood shows that he wrote "from the lived horizon of the African liberation struggle" (Serequeberhan 2000: 9).²⁶ Furthering his point, Serequeberhan (2000: 10) notes how Fanon calls out directly to all 'ex-natives', *as well as to their former colonisers and those who even today indirectly benefit from this colonization*. He calls upon them to refuse to accept this history as arbitrarily unchangeable. Serequeberhan notes that, in choosing to refute this historical imperialization and to confront this heritage, one begins to emancipate oneself from its ensnaring and all-encompassing constriction of possibilities; its "constricting horizon." As Serequeberhan (2000: 10) summarizes: "in this choice he or she becomes open to the 'effects' of a different 'effective-history.' In refusing, such a person negates – for whatever reason – his or her self-understanding, *within the colonial horizon*, in terms of which he or she had lived life up to that point."²⁷

26 Serequeberhan is quoting Fanon 1963: 106.

27 Serequeberhan is referencing Gadamer (1982: 264-266) and then cross-referencing that with Fanon (1965: Appendixes 1 and 2). See footnote 62 of Serequeberhan 2000: 81.

Note what is going on in this reading of Fanon: through Fanon's work – primarily *Wretched of the Earth*, but also his articles (Serequeberhan rarely quotes from *Black Skin, White Masks*) – Serequeberhan is employing Fanon's autoethnographic style and approach to decolonisation as a means emphasize its historicity and how it compliments Gadamer's 'effective-historical consciousness.' He does something similar in *Existence and Heritage*, wherein the last chapter, simply entitled "Frantz Fanon: Thinking as Openness", Serequeberhan brings the two together. After a brief discourse on Gadamer's notion that historicity opens us to "*the truth that we are*" – meaning both that we exist and who we are – Serequeberhan (2015: 118) states: "For, indeed, the formerly subjugated – and not historically and culturally hybridized – have become interlocutors who have to be taken seriously in mutual dialogical interaction" with the West.²⁸ In the very next sentence and paragraph, Serequeberhan continues (2015: 118): "it is in this context that Fanon, in concluding *Les damnés de la terre*, calls us to invention."

Although, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy's* final chapters explore Fanon's thoughts on revolution and violence, Serequeberhan's later work continually stresses the call coming from within Fanon's life and thought, and how that call emanates from a demand for justice and emancipation from Western domination.²⁹ As he sees it, "Fanon calls from *within a lived fracture, an open wound*; his call [...] does not rest on given and established normative structures. *His call originates from a lived experience of fracture, a concrete absence, a 'gap between actuality and ideality'*" (Serequeberhan 2000: 8) [emphasis added]. As mentioned above, the self-realization of this absence and how it both reflects upon one's personhood (or selfhood, *Dasein* even) and the effective-historical situation whence crafted that selfhood is the pathway toward a lived existence.

In closing, what we can gather from Serequeberhan's reading of Fanon is that 'his Fanon', if you will, embodies what it means to be a lived existence and to hold oneself in hermeneutic tension between the concrete reality of their existence and the heritage that one inherits. This heritage, whether one wants it or not, must be confronted through this concrete reality. Though Fanon's wound may never have healed, and others may not ever as well, Fanon's wound is a calling out to others to recognize the destruction which caused these wounds. In so doing, one confronts their heritage – both its positives and negatives – and risks that this confrontation may open themselves to new horizons of possibilities. Horizons which are seen through a lived existence that authentically knows itself.

28 He is quoting Gadamer (1976: 16), emphasis is Serequeberhan's. Note that this is a reprisal, or theme, which runs throughout the book.

29 See Serequeberhan 1994: 72-78; Serequeberhan 2000: 7.

These possibilities, these new horizons, may never heal past wounds, but they may prevent future ones. They may reopen oneself to a future-past whereby new vantage points, new horizons, arise from that past. They may disclose horizons or regions of truth heretofore disclosed. If the risk toward openness – toward the Other, toward one's past, toward one's cultural past, toward the history presently being written – pays off, then Serequeberhan's dream for African philosophy (and all of philosophy) may just be realized. It is a risk worth taking.

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