

# POSTCOLONIAL THINKING AND MODES OF BEING-WITH OTHERS

**MINKA WOERMANN**

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Stellenbosch University (South Africa)*  
minka@sun.ac.za

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to interrogate the mode of relationality – or Being-with Others – that supports a responsible postcolonial thinking. The paper draws from both the Western and African philosophical traditions. Three modes of Being-with Others are identified at the hand of Martin Heidegger's and Jean-Luc Nancy's work, namely the exterior mode, in which we simply exist alongside one another; the interior mode, wherein our identities are assimilated by a historically-constituted community; and, the non-essentialised mode, wherein our identities are open to Others. The paper critically explores African Humanism and African Communitarianism in order to demonstrate how – in practice – these views often lend support to the exterior mode and the interior mode respectively. As an alternative to these views, a reading of African philosophy that foregrounds the Political as first philosophy is given. It is demonstrated how this reading not only demands a non-essentialised mode of Being-with Others (which will be motivated as the preferred relational mode), but also leads to a view of postcoloniality that is premised on the inherent openness of being and community.

## **KEYWORDS**

Postcoloniality, Ubuntu, Being-with, the Other, African Humanism/Communitarianism, the Political, Heidegger, Nancy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Postcolonial thinking is increasingly becoming an important avenue of research and debate. In a nutshell, postcolonial thinking challenges the hegemony of the Western perspective, which has long been assumed to be objective, neutral and universal. Other knowledge systems (such as for example African Philosophy) have, in turn, long been depicted as minor discourses that stand inferior to Western Philosophy. In short, Western Philosophy has developed as a closed system of knowledge. In challenging this standard picture, postcolonial thinking involves not only a critical interrogation of the substantive issues addressed in philosophy, but also of the status of philosophy as such.

In his essay, titled ‘The right to philosophy from a cosmopolitan point of view’, the post-structural philosopher, Jacques Derrida, argues that responsible thinking demands that we escape the dialectic of Eurocentricism and anti-Eurocentricism in contemplating the future of philosophy. Derrida (2002, p. 337) writes that ‘[t]here are other ways [*voies*] of philosophy than those of appropriation as expropriation ... Not only are there other ways of philosophy, but philosophy, if there is a such a thing, is the other way [*l’autre voie*].’ Following from this, it stands to reason that responsible postcolonial thinking should neither entail a simple rejection of Western philosophy nor an uncritical assimilation of African philosophy, but should seek to overcome the dialectic between these two traditions, by reflecting on, and interrogating, ‘the concrete conditions for respect and the extension of the right to philosophy’ (p. 337).

This latter imperative constitutes the focus of this paper, and the subject matter that informs the investigation concerns different constitutions of subjectivity. Specifically, I am interested in how different conceptual modes of Being-with Others lead to different representations of subjectivity. Although the theoretical points explored hold implications for all forms of subjectivity, I use the current South African socio-political landscape as a frame for contextualising the theoretical discussion. My aim is to argue for a conception of (black) subjectivity that supports an interpretation of postcolonial thinking that affirms the openness of philosophy, as identified by Derrida.

The literature that will be covered in this paper draws from both the Western and African traditions. A hallmark of African (moral) philosophy is the recognition of Others in the constitution of a subject’s identity. This is demonstrated in the popular Ubuntu aphorism, ‘I am because we are, since we are therefore I am’ (Ramosé, 2002a, p. 230). A common interpretation of this aphorism is that of African Humanism, wherein our interrelatedness with Others informs the imperative to create harmonious relationships, characterised by goodwill, solidarity, friendship and love (Shutte, 2001; Metz, 2007). A second popular reading of the above aphorism is that of African Communitarianism, which supports the view that the ‘[t]he community ... makes[s], create[s], or produce[s] the individual’ (Mbiti, 1969, p. 108), as well as provides the grounding for (moral) personhood (Menkiti, 2004).

The influential African philosopher, Thaddeus Metz (2018, p. 209), argues that – regardless of the interpretation followed – a distinct ontological difference between African philosophy and Western philosophy is that Western philosophers view the essence of a natural object as ‘constituted by its intrinsic properties’, whereas African philosophers ‘account for a thing’s essence by appeal to its relational properties.’ Metz is an analytic philosopher, and thus largely equates Western philosophy with Anglo-American philosophy. However, and starting with Martin Heidegger, those working in continental philosophy have sought to resuscitate the original Greek reading of relationality as being-toward (another) (Gasché, 1999).

As a starting point to the analysis, I turn to Heidegger, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's critical re-reading of Heidegger, to forward three accounts of being-with Others. I explore the implications of these accounts theoretically, before demonstrating these implications at the hand of critical readings of African Humanism and Communitarianism within the South African socio-political context. In conclusion, I motivate the preferred account of being-with Others (the Nancean account) at the hand of the (ethical) implications that this account holds. I do so with specific reference to post-colonial thinking, and the Derridean imperative of positioning philosophy differently.

### THREE READINGS OF BEING-WITH OTHERS

Before exploring Heidegger's views on being-with Others, it is firstly necessary to contextualise his project briefly. The significance of his philosophy (with particular reference to *Being and Time*) is that he is the first contemporary philosopher in the Western tradition to accord ontological priority to the question of Being. Indeed, Heidegger criticises René Descartes' view that the cogito sum 'put[s] philosophy on a new and firm footing', since what Descartes leaves unexplored is an interrogation of 'the kind of Being which belongs to the res cogitans, or – more precisely – the *meaning of the Being of the "sun"*' (BT, 24, 46). Heidegger argues that Kant took over Descartes' ontological position in his transcendental logic, thereby further entrenching the West's neglect of the question of being.

Heidegger is of the opinion that humanism, as locked in by Cartesian subjectivism, 'underestimates man's unique position in the clearing of being' (Krell in BW, 1993, p. 215). Heidegger poses an ontic-ontological distinction between being (defined in terms of the facticity of existence) and Being (which constitutes the proper mode of being). He states that '[t]his entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*"' (BT, 7, 27).

Heidegger, moreover, defines *Dasein* as Being-in-the-world, which 'stands for a unitary phenomenon' (BT, 53, 78). Heidegger goes on to explain that 'Being-in is not a "property" which *Dasein* sometimes has and sometimes does not have, and *without* which it could *be* just as well as it could be with.' This means that we should not understand Being-in as a spatial relation, but as an ontological relation with world. Heidegger uses the term "dwelling" to capture the distinctive manner in which *Dasein* is in the world. Michael Wheeler (SEP, 2018) explains as follows: 'To dwell in a house is not merely to be inside it spatially ... Rather, it is to belong there, to have a familiar place there.' The world in which we dwell is familiar to us in that it presents itself as 'the structural whole of significant relationships that *Dasein* experiences – with tools, things of nature, and other human beings – as being-in-the-world' (Krell in BW, 2008, p. 141). Heidegger characterises our relation with

world as “ready-to-hand”, which he contrasts with “present-at-hand”. Ready-to-hand is our primordial mode of engaging with the things (equipment) that constitute our practical realities, whereas present-at-hand signifies the privative, Cartesian mode whereby ‘the corporeal Thing’ is primarily characterized as *res extensa* or world-stuff (BT, 97, 130). Thus, just as the sparrow knows itself pre-theoretically as a being who builds and dwells in nests, so too *Dasein* a priori knows itself through world.

However, and as mentioned in the Krell citation above, the world not only consists of equipment and things in nature, but also of other human beings. Moreover, the bridge between ready-to-hand equipment and Others is that we often recognise specific equipment as concerning the lives and life projects of Others, who, through their everyday activities, are beings like us in that they engage with the world as we do. In this regard, Heidegger writes that:

The boat anchored at the shore is assigned in its Being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes voyages with it; but even if it is a “boat which is strange to us”, it still is indicative of Others. The Others who are thus “encountered” in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such “Things” are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others – a world which is always mine too in advance (BT, 118, 154).

For Heidegger, the world which we share with Others is constituted by our historically-conditioned cultures (those with whom we share equipment, work, affairs, undertakings, and mishaps). Heidegger thus states that ‘[i]n so far as *Dasein* exists factually, it already encounters that which has been discovered within-the-world ... [that which has] *in every case, been incorporated into the history of the world*’ (BT, 388, 440). Yet, Heidegger argues that this ‘historiological disclosure of history’ as facticity (BT, 392, 444; italicised in the original) constitutes an inauthentic mode of existence, insofar as the historicity of *Dasein* is not properly conceptualised. Heidegger uses the example of death to explain the difference between these two notions of history.

On the one hand, death is a simple fact that is constantly occurring in our publicly-shared world. Moreover, Heidegger argues that the interpretation given to death in its everydayness is one in which ‘death is understood as an indefinite something which, above all, must duly arrive from somewhere or other, but which is proximally *not yet present-at-hand* for oneself, and is therefore no threat’ (BT, 253, 297). This notion is captured in the expression, “One dies”. The “one” is therefore not a determinate Other, but a nobody, an anyone. This view constitutes the improper mode of being-towards-death, in that death remains an exterior experience, in which nothing is shared with the Other (Woermann, 2016). Nancy (2008, p. 9) explains as follows: ‘each one remains either at the mercy of or opened to its singular fate: a unique fate insofar as it is one’s own death, but a banal fate insofar as it is the common cessation of life.’

On the other hand, death becomes shared through the historicity and fate of a people. This constitutes the proper mode of being-towards-death, because the authentic *Dasein* ‘hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet has chosen’ (BT, 384, 435). Heidegger goes on to explain as follows:

But if fateful *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with Others, its historicizing is a co-historizing and is determinative for its *destiny* [*Geschick*]. This is how we designate the historicizing of the community, of the people. Destiny is not something that puts itself together out of individual fates, any more than Being-with-one-another can be conceived as the occurring together of several Subjects. Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities. Only in communication and in struggling does the power of destiny become free. *Dasein*’s fateful destiny in and with its “generation” goes to make up the full authentic historicizing of *Dasein* (BT, 384-385, 436).

Nancy (2008 in Woermann, 2016, p. 143) further explains that the proper mode of death, that is the death of the People, is characterised by its non-everydayness, in that the People have been elevated to the level and the intensity of a destiny: being-towards-death no longer concerns a sole existent’s ultimate possibility, but is that through which *history* happens. The people thus present the proper mode of dying, since death is the ‘*common of a community*’ (Nancy, 2008, p. 9).

Nancy’s own philosophical project – as explained in Woermann (2016, pp. 142-145) and summarised here – revolves around the question of being-with Others, and in this regard, he readily acknowledges his debt to Heidegger in writing that ‘no other thinking has penetrated more deeply into the enigma of *Being-with*’. Yet, crucially, he adds that ‘no object of thought remains more unthought than this enigma’ (p. 9). This may seem like a strange qualification, given that Heidegger explicitly declares that ‘[o]nly so far as one’s own *Dasein* has the essential structure of Being-with, is it *Dasein*-with as encounterable for Others.’ (BT, 121, 157). *Mitsein* (being-with) and *Mitdasein* (being-there-with) are thus co-essential to *Dasein*. This is because ‘[t]he “there” (*da*) makes of me at the same time a “with” (*mit*)’. Or more exactly: the “there” is always already a “with” (Devisch, 2000, p. 242). And yet, what is striking is that Heidegger’s discussion of the *mit* is only introduced in section 26 of *Being and Time* (at the hand of a discussion of “taking care of” as the proper relational mode of the “with”). This is long after Heidegger’s extensive discussion on the originality of *Dasein*, which begs the question of whether these two categories are really coessential; or – otherwise put – whether the Other truly impacts on the ontology of *Dasein*.

Nancy (2008) demonstrates the problem with Heidegger’s conception of Being-with at the hand of his treatment of death. He argues that, in Heidegger’s analysis death disappears twice: ‘once as a common demise which remains external to the Being-delivered-over to the ultimate possibility of existing, and again according to

the sublimation that the *common destiny* operates on individual death' (p. 10). On both counts, the "with" is also effaced. In the improper mode, the dying of the anyone, 'the essentiality of the *with* is dissolved' (p. 10). Beings are related contiguously in space (in the crowd); but in their being, they remain absolutely exterior to one another. Death thus becomes nothing more than 'the corpse ... return[ing] to the sheer material juxtaposition of things' (p. 8). In the proper mode, the essentiality of the "with" becomes 'hyperpossible' (p. 10), in that it is 'sublimated, sublated, or heroicized' (p. 11) in destiny. Beings are thus robbed of a shared death because Being-with is sacrificed to the "We", that is, to the common subject of history.

Nancy thus argues that it was against his own intentions that Heidegger managed to either erase or dialecticise being-with Others. Nancy attributes the reason for this to the fact that '*Dasein's* "being-towards-death" was never radically implicated in its being-with - in *Mitsein*' (Nancy, 1991, p. 14). Nancy further states that 'it is this implication that remains to be thought' (p. 14). It is exactly this task that he takes upon himself in opening a space for a "with" that is 'neither in exteriority, nor in interiority. Neither a herd, nor a subject. Neither anonymous, nor "mine". Neither improper, nor proper' (Nancy, 2008, p. 11).

Between the anyone and the People, being-there-with implies 'the common as the sharing of properties (relations, intersections, mixtures)' (p. 4). The "with" is thus 'the proximity (contiguity and distinction) of multiple *theres*' (p. 10). This means that the exclusive "there" must already contain the multiplicity of other "theres" within itself, and similarly Being-with (that is, the relation with Others) cannot be thought of as 'secondary in the constitution of existence, but truly and essentially equiprimordial in the existent' (p. 11). This is why Nancy refers to existents as singular-plural; we are not beings who stand in relation with one another, we are beings who are ontologically defined *as* relation. As such, Others cannot be reduced to mere bodies, or to the immanent community of the People. Community (in Nancy's understanding) is not premised on assimilation, but co-exposition, wherein existents ontologically expose themselves to nothing other than one another, and wherein death implies a sharing 'between all existents, between us, the eternity of each existence' (p. 13). Ignaas Devisch (2000, pp. 244; 245) summarises the implications of Nancy's understanding of the *with* as follows:

For Nancy, being is "with". The primordial ontological conditions of our community are not conceived as the One, the Other or the We, but as the "with", "relationality", and the "between". The question of being (*Seinsfrage*) is therefore the question of being-with (*Mitseinsfrage*) ... The way Nancy tries to articulate our single being in the world transforms [Descartes'] *ego sum* into an *ego sum expositus* [I am exposed] or (what is the same thing) a *nos sumus* [we are].

In summary, the three views on being-with Others that come to the fore in this discussion are the *exterior view*, in which we simply exist alongside other beings; the *interior view*, wherein our identities are assimilated by a historically-constituted

community; and, the *non-essentialised view*, wherein our identities are open to Others. In what follows, I shall offer critical readings of both the communitarian and the humanist accounts of African moral philosophy (Ubuntu), with the aim of demonstrating that these views are in danger of respectively fostering an interior and exterior account of being-with Others. I illustrate this danger at the hand of examples stemming from the South African context.

## BEING-WITH IN AFRICAN HUMANISM

One of the early propagators of the humanist interpretation of Ubuntu was Augustine Shutte. In the chapter titled, ‘An ethic for a New South Africa’, Shutte (2001, p. 66) offers the following description of Ubuntu:

UBUNTU ... is essentially a knowledge and affirmation of the humanity we all share - and so it is properly translated *humanity*. It is the power that produces personal growth in individuals and at the same time creates personal community between them. This is the twofold goal of the ethic of UBUNTU.

More recently, Thaddeus Metz (2007) has sought to circumscribe this humanist interpretation of Ubuntu into a principle of right action. This principle is based on two features of Ubuntu that create personal community or what Metz calls harmony, understood as love or friendship. These features are a shared identity and good will, which when brought together, form the following principle:

An act is right if it prizes other persons in virtue of their natural capacity to relate harmoniously; otherwise, an act is wrong, and especially insofar as it prizes discordance (Metz, 2016, p. 178).

In South Africa’s socio-political sphere, Archbishop Desmond Tutu tirelessly advocates the humanist interpretation of Ubuntu. He argues that ‘[h]armony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* - the greatest good’ (Tutu, 1999, p. 35). As is well-known, Tutu also served as the Chair of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). The TRC was created and mandated as a court-like body in 1995, with the aim of hearing the testimony of the victims and perpetrators of the apartheid state. Unlike legal courts, the TRC was based on a reconciliatory, rather than a retributive, view of justice and perpetrators could thus request amnesty. In reflecting on the hearings, Tutu notes that he drew on both his Christian and cultural values. Specifically, ‘he constantly referred to the notion of Ubuntu when ... guiding and advising witnesses, victims and perpetrators during the Commission hearings’ (Murithi, 2006, p. 28).

David McDonald (2010, p. 142) further notes how Ubuntu was employed ‘by a host of traditional leaders, churches, community organisations, NGOs and politicians since the end of apartheid to push for a “moral regeneration” of South Africa.’ Following apartheid, South Africa quickly became known locally and globally as

“The Rainbow Nation” (a term coined by Tutu, and further enlivened by then President Nelson Mandela). The Rainbow Nation refers to a country that demonstrates unity in diversity. This notion of unity is premised on the understanding that ‘my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in [your humanity]’ (Tutu, 1999, p. 5).

Business and politics were quick to follow in the wake of the successful uptake of Ubuntu. Yet, what was missing in their appeals to Ubuntu was the commitment with which men such as Mandela and Tutu lived Ubuntu. Indeed, in an article titled ‘*Ubuntu* bashing: the marketization of “African values” in South Africa’, McDonald (2010) explores the uptake and appropriation of the language of Ubuntu by market ideologies in post-apartheid South Africa. McDonald argues that ‘the entire market-orientated *ubuntu* project of the last two decades [now almost three] rings hollow’ (p. 147), because, for the most part, business continues as usual. Another influential African philosopher, Leonhard Praeg (2017, p. 298), phrases this criticism more strongly in writing that:

[w]e only “rented” African subjectivity in the form of Ubuntu in order to get through the transition from one Western political form (apartheid) to another (liberal democracy). Once we got to the other side, we discarded every recognition of “shared humanity” from talk about “shared resources” ... It may perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that on every front - macro-economic, legal, political - the African conception of personhood *that founded our politico-judicial order* has been systematically instituted against since 1994 ....

This type of critique has also been levelled against the concept of “Rainbowism”, which is increasingly viewed by a generation of disgruntled South Africans as a convenient way of covering over the country’s socio-economic disparities. The force of Rainbowism, like the appeal to Ubuntu in a post-national context, largely degenerated into a rhetorical exercise that stands in the way of meaningful structural change, including institutional change (Gachago and Ngoasheng, 2016). Perhaps a reason for this can be found in humanism’s treatment of violence. Praeg (2017, p. 295) argues that the question of violence remains anathema to the humanist interpretation of Ubuntu, which is premised on ‘a whole rainbow of good news - “harmony”, “friendliness”, “love”, “shared humanity”, “forgiveness”, “reconciliation” ...’. It is arguably this myopic view of current realities that has led to such a vacuous appeal to Ubuntu humanism.

It is when African humanism becomes no more than empty rhetoric that we are in danger of fostering an exterior view of being-with Others (akin to Heidegger’s view of the improper mode of being). In this view, Others have no real impact upon my life or my humanity. One good current example of this is the new South African Facebook page, called #ImStaying,<sup>1</sup> which was founded in September 2019, and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/hashtagimstaying>

which – by September 2020 – was 1.2 million members strong. #ImStaying is described as a group that ‘is dedicated to the South African women and men of all races, cultures, religions and creeds that choose to grow and improve South Africa’.

Whilst #ImStaying arguably presents an import pushback to the divisive politics propagated in the media, a concern is that this group will largely end up as an exercise in lip service. Indeed, and again referring to an exterior view of being-with Others, a significant number of posts deal with such trivia as which province members are from, favourite foods and rugby players, and favourite South African expressions. All of this is innocuous, but therein lies the problem. One’s sense of identity in community is reduced to the banal being alongside Others. This is a far cry from viewing our lives as explicitly bound up in the lives of Others (as described by Tutu). Whilst the humanist account initially looked promising as a way of operationalising the non-essentialised Nancean view of being-with Others, the consequences that this view holds in practice prove that African humanism can easily backslide into an exterior account of being with-Others.

## **BEING-WITH IN AFRICAN COMMUNITARIANISM**

A critical reading of African communitarianism reveals that this interpretation fails no better in thinking the “with” of Being-with productively. The reason, however, is the opposite of the problem encountered with humanism. Contrary to humanism, communitarianism runs the risk of fostering an interior view of identity, one which essentialises the “with” in terms of a People. In order to motivate this claim I will consider two interrelated criticisms, which are levelled against Ubuntu’s traditionalism and exclusivity (Louw, 2001).

As a traditional ethic, Ubuntu refers to the different sets of cultural practices defining traditional African cultures. Indeed, these practices are so far removed from contemporary understandings of Ubuntu that Praeg (2017) draws a distinction between Ubuntu as praxis and Ubuntu as abstract philosophical construct. As a traditional ethic, Ubuntu is understood as a praxis, which – as with all traditional cultural norms – should be subjected to ethical scrutiny.

Such scrutiny reveals the danger of an extreme form of violence latent in Communitarianism. Praeg (2017) argues that this violence hinges on understanding the good of the community as outstripping the rights of the individual. When individuals act against community interests, violence is implicitly sanctioned in order to bring individuals back into line. One example that demonstrate the primacy of the community (and the violence inherent in this conception) in Ubuntu praxis concerns initiation rites, specifically circumcision and clitoridectomy. John Mbiti (cited in Ramose 2002b, p. 71) writes of this practice that the blood that is spilled on the soil indicates that the initiated youth ‘wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he or she has been born as a child [and that] until the individual has

gone through the operation, he [or she] is still an outsider.’ The traditional ethic of Ubuntu thus – in at least some instances – also incorporates an exclusionary ethic.

Generally speaking, when Ubuntu is interpreted in terms of an exclusionary ethic, one runs the risk of forwarding a narrow and closed conception of community. Dirk Louw (2001) argues that this derailed view of Ubuntu ‘represents the fortification and preservation of a specific group identity through limitation and segregation’ (p. 121).

In terms of contemporary society, a narrow, communitarian reading of Ubuntu offers justification for putting the interests of a specific group ahead of the interests of the broader public. In a heterogeneous and politically-fraught society such as South Africa’s examples abound. Praeg (2017, p. 296) references examples of past violations of law (and even of the Constitution) by the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which were justified by appealing to the unity of the party. In these examples, the unity of the party is seen as more important than the Constitution and the unity of the citizens of South Africa. Implicit in the ANC’s appeal is a conception of unity premised on the collective political identity of a people, as opposed to a traditionally-shared way of life.

In order to understand this statement, it is important to acknowledge how the concept of black subjectivity came into being. Praeg (2017) argues that the Political is first philosophy within African philosophy, which means that ‘it is the very nature of the subject at hand (African subjectivity) that the historicity and therefore the political history of the African subject should be foregrounded as point of departure’ (pp. 293-294). The Political as first philosophy thus constitutes an investigation of the divided and ambivalent ground from which (black) subjectivity springs forth and develops. Praeg (2019a, pp. 101-102) identifies four constituent moments characterising the development of the modern black subject. The first moment created the perception of “blackness” as a function of the experience of the black, modern subject viewing itself through the racialised, and racialising, gaze of the white coloniser. The second moment is characterised by the emergence of a counter-hegemonic black subject: “we, the community of oppressed black people subjected to slavery and colonialism”. The third moment represents a conscious effort by black intellectuals, artists, and politicians to counter the negative stigmas associated with “blackness” in colonialist discourse by giving positive attributes to “blackness”, and hence to black subjects. The last moment is the moment in which black knowledge and knowledge systems are viewed as conditions for a new emancipatory humanity in postcolonial Africa and beyond.

In modern politics, an appeal to unity thus more often than not constitutes an appeal to a shared politically-informed constitution of black subjectivity, rather than a culturally-shared way of life. One of the clearest examples hereof is the pan-Africanist socialist political party in South Africa, called Black First Land First (BLF), whose “Revolutionary Call”, released on 13 August 2015, reads as follows:

Without land there is no freedom or dignity. We want Land First because it is the basis of our freedom, our identity, or spiritual well-being, our economic development and culture ... We are the people crying for our stolen land! Now we have decided to get it back by any means necessary.<sup>2</sup>

The “Revolutionary Call” evokes a derailed interpretation of the second moment typifying the constitution of black subjectivity, wherein the community of oppressed black people actively resists slavery and colonialism (depicted as stolen land in the above Call). Whilst the importance of counter-hegemonic discourses in exposing and usurping ill-begotten power and resources should be encouraged, the mandate of BLF is clearly exclusionary. In viewpoints like these, community becomes the vehicle for promoting racism, xenophobia and cultural, class or ethnic purity (Louw, 2001). Indeed, BLF has been embroiled in a number of controversies concerning these types of issues, the most serious being hate speech towards white people, which was justified by the party as a defense of black people, and their interests.<sup>3</sup>

The dangers of a communitarian reading premised on an exclusionary ethic are not limited to the politics practiced on the southern tip of Africa. Indeed, Heidegger’s own reading of the destinal unity of the community of the People arguably betrays the seeds of his Nazism. Both Nancy and Emmanuel Levinas, for example, identify a totalitarian impulse in Heidegger’s work. Nancy, however, goes further in arguing that the desire for a common identity underscores not only Heidegger’s work, but the whole of Western culture. This is true to the extent that there remains a longing ‘for a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 9). Indeed, one could argue that current nationalist political regimes – such as Trump’s America, which is defined by the slogan “Make America Great *Again*” (my italics) – are premised on this exact logic.

An uncritical uptake of African Communitarianism thus suffers from the same implications as Heidegger’s conception of the proper mode of Being-with Others in community. In both cases, the individual is viewed as secondary to the community. This is achieved by either sublimating individual death into the common destiny (Heidegger), or by sublimating the individual into either a traditionally-sanctioned way of life or a community of politically-constituted subjects (African Communitarianism).

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_First\\_Land\\_First](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_First_Land_First)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_First\\_Land\\_First](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_First_Land_First)

## POSTCOLONIALITY AND THE NON-ESSENTIALISED BEING-WITH

Having argued that neither Heidegger's philosophy nor a Communitarian or Humanist understanding of African philosophy provide the resources for developing a conception of the with-Others as truly co-essential to subjectivity, I now turn (re)turn to Praeg's statement that within African philosophy the Political is first philosophy. I shall argue that grounding African philosophy in the Political offers us an avenue for developing a non-essentialised account of Being-with that resonates with Nancy's view of Being *as* relation. Moreover, I shall argue that this account also provides an opening for a responsible postcolonial thinking, which would - in principle - be capable of positioning philosophy beyond the dialectic of Eurocentricism and anti-Eurocentricism.

To begin, we need to distinguish between politics and the Political. Many of the examples appealed to in the foregoing analysis concern politics, that is, 'the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed'<sup>4</sup>. As also demonstrated in the above analysis, politics can be subjected to critical scrutiny. In contrast to politics, "the Political" (the conversion of the adjective into the noun), emerged in the English language during the 1980s/1990s with the translation of Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1996) and Claude Lefort's *Political Forms of Modern Society* (1986) (Valentine, 2017). Broadly-speaking, the Political refers either to 'the basis of a method or criteria which could determine the specificity of politics' or 'as something like the conditions of politics in a constitutive rather than transcendental sense' (p. 197). The concept of the Political, specifically the second interpretation thereof, also features strongly in the work of Nancy.

Briefly, Nancy defines the essence of the Political as informed by conditions that are necessarily connected to community and freedom. The emphasis on community and freedom has a twofold aim, namely to restore the priority of the ethical within the Political so as to usurp the focus on power and domination, and to demonstrate that any global attempt at prescription or regulation must necessarily fail (Ingram, 1988). The reason for the latter concerns Nancy's understanding of freedom and community. Ingram notes that, as with Levinas, Nancy distinguishes between morality (the codes operating in the socio-political order) and ethics (the passivity and openness to the inassimilable Other). Whereas morality 'involves prescribing actions within a view of global consequences; [ethics] imposes a prior obligation to remain open to questioning as such' (p. 106). This questioning implies a freedom that opens up politics, because, as Derrida (1978, p. 80) argues, '[t]here is no stated law, no commandment, that is not addressed to a freedom of speech.'

Such a radical questioning also 'implies a fundamental openness towards possibilities of judgment, of disclosing anew the meaningful "identity" (being) of self and

<sup>4</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politics>

world' (Ingram, 1988, p. 106). Furthermore, if the Other is co-essential to my identity, and if community is the constant co-exposition of beings to one another, then it stands to reason that finite community is also defined by this freedom and openness. To convey this idea, Nancy writes that community

necessarily occurs in what Blanchot has called *désouevrement* (undoing, omission, or suspension of the work): before or beyond the work, that which withdraws (retires or retreats) from the work, that which no longer has anything to do with either production of completion, but which encounters interruption, fragmentation, [and the] suspens[ion of] ... singular beings ... at/on the limit' (Nancy, 1986, pp. 78-79; trans. Ingram, 1988).

On the basis of this understanding of freedom and community, Nancy (p. 100) defines the Political as 'inscrib[ing] the partitioning and sharing of community'. Moreover, it is this recursive partitioning and sharing that should inform the concrete politics and codes of a community.

The implications that this understanding of the Political holds for postcoloniality neither endorse a thinking that pays lip-service to being-with in community, nor a thinking that retains the oppositional binary between the West and Africa. Rather, and as argued by Praeg (2014, p. 171), postcoloniality is better understood as 'a condition in which the passage from bare life to the Political, from a multiplicity of form to the subject(ivity) of, say, the liberal democratic nation states, remains forever visible *as a passage*'. In terms of post-colonial thinking, and particularly the Political constitution of black subjectivity, keeping this passage visible means reckoning with the partitioning and sharing of community. Every being is both singular and plural, and subjectivity is thus cast in terms of both differentiation and relation. On the one hand, foregoing the socio-cultural and historical grounds of differentiation (including how (black) subjectivity is represented in light of, and as a response, to the (white) Other), leads to a banal politics or a happy humanism. On the other hand, foregoing the relational aspect of identity, that is, how being-with Others constitutes our very ontology, leads to a closed politics (a totalitarian communalism).

In terms of black subjectivity, the implications of this double-thinking are that, on the one hand, '[t]he black subject does not get to leave the originary moment of differentiation from the rest of humanity behind - not in historical terms ... or in the "foundational terms" of a juridico-political order' (Praeg, 2017, p. 9). In other words, confronting the Political necessarily means dealing with the arche-cut that runs through philosophy as Subject, but that also cuts subjectivities. On the other hand, this thinking also means that the project of construing the "totality of black consciousness" necessarily fails for the reason that every definition of black subjectivity 'always constitutively exceeds itself because the boundary concept that makes black subjectivity possible and thinkable as a unified whole or a totality is a double concept, *a site whose activity is inside/outside differentiation*' (Praeg, 2019a, p. 104).

This double-thinking necessitates that we take seriously the Nancean imperative of thinking community as the suspension of singular beings at/on the limit. In the place of consensus and ideology, the Political demands a questioning informed by contingency and complexity. To responsibly engage in postcolonial discourse is therefore to confront the contestations, ambiguities, violence, and politics of what it means to write (African) philosophy differently, and to recognise that this site of activity does not eventually give itself over to a unified whole or totality. Rather, we remain at the limit or on the border. In reflecting on the title of his edited volume, *Philosophy on the Border: Decoloniality and the Shudder of the Origin*, Praeg (2019b, p. 1) expresses the above argument as follows,

[b]eing ‘on’ the border ... means standing on the line of differentiation: neither on this side nor the other side ... [B]eing ‘on’ the border suggests less of a differentiation between this and that and more a dedifferentiation of this *and* that, of being *in* difference.

In conclusion, confronting the Political in postcolonial thinking does not allow for a comfortable politics, but it does pave the way towards a more *responsible* politics – one that is first and foremost informed by the ethical, defined in terms of a ceaseless and free questioning. Furthermore, in grappling with the difficult conceptual and practical implications of what it means to be constituted in community, postcolonial theorists may be able to offer a positive reflection in response to Derrida’s appeal to think ‘the concrete conditions for respect and the extension of the right to philosophy’.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Derrida, J. (2002). The right to philosophy from a cosmopolitical point of view: the example of an international Institution. In P.P. Trifonas (Ed. and trans.). *Ethics, institutions, and the right to philosophy* (pp. 1-18). Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Derrida, J. (1978). Violence and metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Writing and difference* (trans. A. Bass, pp. 79-153). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Devisch, I. (2000). A trembling voice in the desert: Jean-Luc Nancy’s rethinking of the space of the political. *Cultural Values*, 4(2), 239-256.

Gachago, D. and Ngoasheng, A. (2016). South Africa’s “Rainbow Nation” is a myth that students need to unlearn. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-rainbow-nation-is-a-myth-that-students-need-to-unlearn-66872>

Gasché, R. (1991). *Of minimal things: studies on the notion of relation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic writings* (Ed. D.F. Krell). New York: HarperCollins.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson). New York: Harper and Row.
- Ingram, D. (1988). The retreat of the political in the modern age: Jean-Luc Nancy on totalitarianism and community. *Research in Phenomenology*, 18, 93-124.
- Louw, D.J. (2010). Rethinking Ubuntu. In J. Ogude (Ed.). *Ubuntu and the reconstitution of community* (pp. 114-130). Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Mbiti, J. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- McDonald, D. (2010). *Ubuntu* bashing: the marketization of “African values” in South Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(124), 139-152.
- Menkiti, A.I. (2004). On the normative conception of a person. In K. Wiredu (Ed.). *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 324-331). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Metz, T. (2018). What is the essence of an essence? Comparing Afro-relational and Western-individualist ontologies. *Philosophical Papers*, 65(1), 209-224.
- Metz, T. (2007). Towards an African Moral Theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321-341.
- Murithi, T. (2006). Practical peacemaking. Wisdom from Africa: reflections on Ubuntu. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(4), 25-34.
- Nancy, J.-L. (2008). The being-with of being-there (trans. M.E. Morin). *Continental Philosophy Review*, 41, 1-15.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1991). *The inoperative community* (Ed. P. Connor; trans. P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland and S. Sawhney). Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1986). *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois.
- Praeg, L. (2019a). Philosophy of the border. In L. Praeg (Ed.). *Philosophy on the border: decoloniality and the shudder of the origin* (pp. 1-32). Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Praeg, L. (2019b). Totality by analogy; or: the limits of law and black subjectivity. In L. Praeg (Ed.). *Philosophy on the border: Decoloniality and the shudder of the origin* (pp. 95-111). Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Praeg, L. (2017). Essential building blocks of the Ubuntu debate; or: I write what I must. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 36:2, 292-304.
- Praeg, L. (2014). Postcards from the postcolony. In G. Farred, K. Kawwahirehi and L. Praeg (Eds.). *Violence in/and The Great Lakes; the thoughts of V.Y. Mudimbe and beyond* (pp. 161-187). Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Ramose, M.B. (2002a). The philosophy of *Ubuntu* and *Ubuntu* as a philosophy. In P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (Eds.). *Philosophy for Africa* (pp. 230-238). Oxford University Press: Cape Town.
- Ramose, M.B. (2002b). *African philosophy through Ubuntu* (rev.). Harare: Mond.
- Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: an ethics for a New South Africa*. Cluster Publications: Pietermaritzburg.
- Tutu, D. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Random House.
- Valentine, J. (2017). Review: Politics and the concepts of the political: The political imagination by James Wiley. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(S4), 197-200.

Wheeler, M. (2018). Martin Heidegger. In E.N. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/heidegger/>

Woermann, M. (2016). *Bridging complexity and post-structuralism*. Switzerland: Springer International.