

“Afterword: Respect for Derrida in/and Africa,” in Grand Farred, ed., *Derrida and Africa: Essays on Derrida as a Figure in African Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 85-93.

One of the most striking features of this collection of essays is the respect that the authors have for their topic: Derrida in/and Africa. Amidst all the predictable unsettledness, the requisite out-of-jointness, the compulsory a-contemporaneity and out-of-placeness, the obligatory haunting that is always no-longer and/or not-yet, the mandatory and never finished mourning, amidst all these telltale signs of good Derridean thinking, one thing curiously remains steadfast and unchanging: respect. Respect for the man who lived between 1930 and 2004, for a continent named Africa, for the dual topic under scrutiny, and for the scholarship that gives rise to all these thoughts about Derrida in/and Africa. At no point in this collection there is a sudden disrespect for Derrida or Africa, a way of contemptuously saying “no” to the man who wrote so much or the continent that gives so much. Not that one would expect a lack of civility or ungraciousness, but one might expect, at least, that one of these scholars rejects both the man who once lived in Paris and/or this continent of over a billion people. Every essayist respectfully says “yes” to both. As such, respect permeates every thought here, even when these thoughts veer off the topic at hand.

Now, how is one to make sense of this formidably unfaltering respect that seems to contrast so blatantly with the prerequisite undecidedness that always pervades writings inspired by Derrida? To answer this question, I will first go back to Derrida’s own interpretation of this respect. How does Derrida understand respect? In the limited context of an Afterword, I can only limit myself to one reading amidst all of his oeuvre and

scholarship: his reading of Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of respect. How does Derrida, through Levinas, make sense of respect? This will constitute the first part of this Afterword. I will then see how the scholars invited to contribute to this collection of essays on the topic of Derrida in/and Africa are true to this Derridean form of respect. The aim is obviously not to reveal these scholar's respectful attitudes (or lack of), but to uncover what overall sustains itself as a permanent ethical fixture in any form of deconstructive writing, especially when this writing concerns Africa.

There is obviously no space to retrace here the way Derrida formulates, following Levinas, his own understanding of the issue of respect *in its entirety*. One would have to re-read carefully the many instances when Derrida interacts not only with Levinas's thought, but also with that of his closest contemporaries, Buber, Bataille, Heidegger, or Blanchot, to name only a few. The only thing one can do in the limited space of this Afterword is to read a crucial few passages from "Violence and Metaphysics" in which Derrida directly addresses the problems of Levinas's attempt to come up with a philosophy of respect. He writes:

"In the last analysis, according to Levinas, [the] language [of respect] would be a language which would do without the verb *to be*, that is, without predication. Predication is the first violence. Since the verb *to be* and the predicative act are implied in every other verb, and in every common noun, [the] language [of respect], in the last analysis, would be a language of pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only proper nouns in order to call to the other from afar. In effect, such a language would be purified of all rhetoric, which is what Levinas explicitly desires; and purified of the first sense of rhetoric, which we can invoke without artifice, that is, purified of every *verb*. Would such a language still deserve its name? Is a language free from all rhetoric possible? The Greeks, who

taught us what *Logos* meant, would never have accepted this. Plato tells us in the *Cratylus* (425a), the *Sophist* (262 ad) and in *Letter VII* (342b), that there is no *Logos* which does not suppose the interlacing of nouns and verbs.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us play, for a moment, devil’s advocate: if one is seriously going to follow Levinas, then one needs to accept the fact that respect can only occur if a language of invocation is used, that is, if a “pure” language—without predication or the verb “to be”—is put forward. “I (invocation) you, I (adoration) you.” These are the only ways respect can take place. The “I” and the “you” of these sentences do not even amount to the recognition of a subject or ego and the invocation or adoration here does not even manage to be an active and therefore aggressive appropriation of the other. I don’t write “I invoke you, I adore you.” I bracket the invocation and adoration in order to avoid at all costs the violence of verbs. Not unlike the unpronounceable YHWH, “you” remain therefore a subject of total invocation and adoration: untouched, unobjectified, and therefore, unharmed. This is the only end to Levinas’s pious language; a language that never violates the other, that never becomes Greek, that is, a “dirty” language full of authoritative predicative sentences that violate the other.

But is this reasonable? Can one really remain purely in the realm of invocation or adoration, i.e. a language devoid of verbs? Are we not always already in a world of contamination, half-Jew-half-Greek? Is it not Levinas himself who teaches us elsewhere (paradoxically) that there is no escaping the realm of violence and therefore the realm of war? And if this is the case, should we then abandon all Levinasian forms of invocation or adoration and therefore all genuine attempts to truthfully respect the other? As the quotation above makes clear, Derrida’s answer is a resounding: “Yes!” Let’s abandon Levinas’s verb-less attempt to be respectful, let’s simply try to reduce the violence of *Logos* as much as possible, knowing that a *Logos* free of violence is ultimately

impossible. With such an unambiguous affirmation, verbs must therefore be restrained of their violent ways. But how is one to reduce the violence of predicative sentences? How does this Derridean respect that always already remains in the realm of war manifests itself without, in the end, violating the other? How does Derrida understand respect *after* Levinas?

In order to make sense of Derrida's own take on the issue of respect, I would like to simply explore a key concept in Derrida's work discretely exposed in "Violence and Metaphysics": the verb "to ac-knowledge." With such a quick foray into Derrida's own understanding of this expression, I will then be able to return to the preceding essays with a much clearer idea of how they maintain a form of respect for their topic (Derrida in/and Africa) and the authors they involve.

In a section of "Violence and Metaphysics," entitled "Ontological Violence," Derrida puts forward three verbs to make sense of respect: "to pre-comprehend," "to com-prehend" and "to ac-knowledge."<sup>2</sup> In each case, the verb is always left open with a hyphen. There is unfortunately, no space here to make sense of this differentiation, especially with regards to the French: *pre-comprendre*, *com-prendre*, and *re-connaître*. I will focus here exclusively, for lack of space, on the last verb ("to ac-knowledge") while keeping the other two in mind. So let me first see how one can understand this differentiation that Derrida makes between the verb open with a hyphen ("to ac-knowledge") and the verb left unhyphenated ("to acknowledge")? Such a seemingly pointy and perhaps, to some, pedantic focus should reveal a great deal about Derrida and respect.

Firstly, "to acknowledge," in one word, usually refers to the acceptance of the truth or existence of something or someone: "I acknowledge this table in front of me." As such, the verb "to acknowledge" serves as a possible basis for the science of

epistemology insofar as it is concerned with the identification, classification, and use of knowledge. The second, “to ac-knowledge,” this time opened with a hyphen, refers to an epistemic process that curiously never manages to constitute itself into a body of knowledge. Derrida’s French brings together the prefix *re-* and the verb *connaître*. Spacing out the prefix from the verb leaves in suspense the moment when knowledge stabilizes itself as something recognizable and repeatable. Similarly, the English brings together the prefix *ac-* and the noun *knowledge* (with a parasitic *c* mysteriously slipped in over time). Whether in French or English, this spacing out between prefix and verb or noun is therefore an attempt to think the *flight* of knowledge, its occurrence, before any form of assurance or security with regards to the knowledge gained or acquired.

As such, “I ac-knowledge” (open) achieves effectively no knowledge. It stands for an approach that withholds the possibility of any form of figuring or picturing; leaving whatever or whoever is approached most simply, un-acknowledged and therefore strictly un-identifiable, un-classifiable, and ultimately, outside of all types of taxonomies. For example, “I ac-knowledge that you are probably reading this essay and yet I cannot place you, I cannot acknowledge (one word) you properly, that is, with a name, a history, a time, and a place.” Derrida’s split verb is therefore an attempt to not appropriate the other, to let him be un-interpreted, un-classified, un-gendered, in a word, un-violated. The importance of the hyphen cannot be underestimated for it points to the fact that knowledge remains open; it is neither a recognition nor a cognition, which would fossilize the other, but a gesture that leaves whoever is being addressed unaffected, that is, untouched. Ultimately, the aim behind this openness is to prevent the cancelling out of the future, whereby the object of knowledge is already singled out, fixed, branded, categorized, classified and therefore subjected, controlled, mastered, and dominated. “To ac-knowledge” is to guarantee that the future can still take place.

The crucial lesson that comes out of this distinction between verbal formations (one closed, the other open) is that it opens up the possibility of conceiving how we might *begin* to formulate a language of respect. Derrida refers to this possibility with much more precision when, in his reading of Levinas, he points to the ethical way in which thought takes place. He writes: “Thought... conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other.”<sup>3</sup> Derrida’s move from “to ac-knowledge” to “thought” is self-evident in as much as the gesture “to ac-knowledge” can already be identified in how thought takes place. Thought indeed never settles. Thought allows us to approach the other without determination. It is precisely what leaves the other “be” always already other to me. The language of respect therefore starts not by fixing ideas concretely once and for all, but by letting thought run a course that has no pre-determined end in sight. A true language of respect can therefore only mimic the errancy of thought without at the same time being simply a divagation, prayer, or invocation.

How is one to understand this further? Derrida’s short sentence contains a crucial verb that should come across as the exact opposite of any form of respect: “to condition.” Thought *conditions* and this conditioning ends up paradoxically being respectful of the other. How is one to make sense of this? The conditioning here is not a way of influencing the other, but a way of fixing their irreducible alterity, i.e. this alterity that, in the other, can never be identified, secured, or fossilized. In other words, however much in thought, I want to acknowledge the other, I want to appropriate the other as mine, he, she, or they remain(s) always beyond my grasp, *always conditioned as being beyond reach*. Thought effectively provides us with a conditioning process, i.e. a gradual fixing that, strangely, but most clearly, secures the respect of the other; a paradoxical fact that should indeed leave all those who advocate “the respect for all” if not baffled or disconcerted, at

least a little worried because, technically, it stands for the exact opposite to all traditional forms of respect whereby the other should always be left *unconditioned*.

But how is one to conceive this *conditioning* of thought that secures the alterity of the other? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to realise that, for Derrida, this conditioning is necessarily understood paradoxically both passively *and* actively. This movement of thought that never makes it as knowledge is a movement whose aim is basically to always bring forth new thoughts, that is, new horizons, new mysteries. This “bringing forth of new thoughts” is both at once active and passive. For example, “I, again, ac-knowledge you future reader.” This ac-knowledgement implies an *act* that *actively* projects you into the future as a reader of *Derrida in/and Africa*. But this ac-knowledgement is also essentially *passive* as I am unable to know in advance who you are and what your thoughts are about Derrida in/and Africa. This passivity is effectively irreducible because I can never determine in advance what you will potentially think of this collection of essays. Consequently, the activity/passivity of this ac-knowledgement is not something that can be determined in advance or judged *as* it takes place. The conditioning of respect is a way of *working actively/passively with* what can never be appropriated or judged.

So here we are. This is how respect works for Derrida, at least at the time of his reading of Levinas: it is the ac-knowledgement that there is always a movement towards the other, a movement that never accomplishes itself, thus leaving the other unaffected, untouched, unharmed, a radical alterity *conditioned*, but never guaranteed. Because “to ac-knowledge” can *only* orient itself towards the other, that is, towards a renewed mystery, it has no choice but to lean towards respect, that is, towards the renewed possibility of dialogue. “To ac-knowledge” is a way of keeping faith—a faith without religion—that there will always be something beyond the violence of predicative verbs;

that there is always the possibility of a future together that defies the need for violence. Without this ac-knowledgement; without this conditioning that structures language and secures respect amidst the warring of words and predicative sentences, there would be no renewed opinions, no free-speech, no book on Derrida in/and Africa.

So what of these essays? What can be learned from these essays and the way they steadfastly secure, in their own ways, respect for Derrida in/and Africa? Can we talk of a conditioning of the other in these essays? Let's survey tangentially and not exhaustively what occurs in the preceding pages. Since the essays contained in this book are already written and are therefore, somehow, "fixed knowledge" and not a live debate, this survey necessarily takes the shape of a straightforward analysis of the textual form of respect contained herein, albeit one that could never be qualified of "deconstructive" properly speaking.

Firstly, respect comes in the shape of the obligatory quotation (Farred, Steyn, Kavwahirehi, Janz, Bragg, Drabinski). To respect Derrida is to quote him, that is, to take possession of portions of Derrida's thought and to graft (*graphein*) them in a foreign writing, even if what is quoted is utterly out of context, a total betrayal of his thinking. These obligatory quotations are invariably accompanied by mandatory contextualisations (Farred, Steyn, Kavwahirehi) in the shape of literature reviews justifying the borrowing and/or the new writing. Quoted and contextualised, these scholars thus push further Derrida's thought, maintaining it alive, extending the arch of his thought a little longer, thus reaching out to new readers. As such, the thought of Derrida continues respectfully over and beyond his grave, enjoining others to think with him in a trajectory that knows no closure, an ac-knowledgement that never reduces the other, here, now—but also, later, in a hundred years-time, who knows—to the Same as them: the scholars in the preceding pages or even Derrida himself. Through such quotation and contextualisation, these



scholars' writings *condition* this unfathomable alterity that secretly maintains respect, thus extending the ethical imperative to continue reading and studying Derrida a little further still.

Respect also comes in these scholars' modes of address. Right from the start, Farred asks, "how to find a form that suits Derrida?" "How to find a form fitted to the work of thinking Derrida in/and Africa?" Respect here manifests itself in the way these scholars respond to Derrida's injunction to write, not just how to write about him or his works, but above all how to write in his name, in the continuation of his thought. This does not show a simple obedience to the injunction of adopting a Derridean style of writing in order to match thought with form; this simply exposes the difficulty of writing if not philosophy, at least in the margins of philosophy. In other words, to ask "what form to take" necessarily assumes that the form of philosophy is not yet fixed, archived, or museified; that it can still be invented, that philosophy can still surprise itself. As such, these scholars, like Derrida himself in his time, come up with new forms of address that encourage philosophy to never stylise itself once and for all, but seek to keep itself open, an ac-knowledgement of mystery still to be fathomed. And with these new forms or mysteries, these scholars ultimately *condition* again, this time formally, this unfathomable alterity that maintains philosophy not just alive, but ultimately, unrecognizable.

This inventive approach to the modes of address is obviously a common tactic in any Derridean context, but it comes to the fore in a remarkable way when the topic addressed is "Africa." Two themes seem to predominate the preceding chapters: origins and ends. The former is most blatantly encapsulated in the tentative gesture of thinking the mother (Bragg), Derrida's mother, mother Africa, and how it is impossible to think without first ac-knowledging this figure that gives birth to thought itself. The latter is predictably embodied by expressions of mourning (Farred, Janz, Bragg), this impossible

mourning that is never achieved, never successful, and yet needs to take place at all cost. The juxtaposition of the two (origins and ends) marks the very Derridean tactic of focusing on liminal topologies, invaginated topographies, and on steps that are also “non-steps” as such. Once again, this strategy marks a type of respect that effectively calls for more, for pushing the boundaries or horizons of the idea of “Africa” so that “it” never settles, geographically or thematically: *becoming* the mother of (future) thought, *being* the (past) death that can never be mourned properly. This inventive approach thus slowly *conditions* this necessary radical alterity that here, most poignantly, has no start or end properly speaking.

Respect also comes in the way the scholars in this edited collection desperately try to locate Derrida somehow *in* Africa, quoting not only Algeria, but also more broadly, the Maghreb (Farred, Steyn, Kavwahirehi, Janz, Bragg, Drabinski) as if this region of north-west Africa manages on its own to excuse Derrida’s white Sephardic European ancestry. If the Maghreb or Algeria is not referenced, then respect takes place by referring to Derrida’s own interactions with other geographical parts of Africa (Steyn) or by the way European philosophy itself, with Derrida at its helm, appropriates the place of Africa (Kavwahirehi). In any case, the insecurity of having to locate him permeates this book: was he really French or was he African? Was he just a Eurocentric thinker or was he able to think beyond the confines of his Jew-Greek heritage (Steyn, Bragg)? Whatever the answer, the message is clear: in the same way that philosophy is not really Greek, but is *from* Africa, Derrida is inevitably also *from* Africa. This does not mean that philosophy and Derrida are Africans. This only means that both necessarily hail *from* Africa, this indefinite place of origin/end, that is, this radical alterity that secretly grounds Derrida’s work and the work of those who link him with this vast continent. In a way, we are never finished locating Derrida—and philosophy generally—as hailing *from* Africa.

Except for Kavwahirehi, respect also comes in the way more or less each essayist appropriates overall the tools of deconstruction and more specifically Derrida's very own devices and cyphers. In their hands, arguments about Derrida in/and Africa become unsurprisingly "ill-fitting" (Farred), "a-punctual" (Farred), "out-of-joint" (Farred), "placeless" (Janz), "haunted" (Janz), "uncanny" (Janz), "uprooted" (Drabinski), etc. It is as if it is impossible to take on a deconstructive approach to Derrida in/and Africa without automatically adopting the requisite implements and instruments that seek out the chips of metaphysical presence. This is no mere parroting of Derrida and his idiosyncratic methods, but a way of acknowledging his project, of letting his project live (*sur-vivre*) over and beyond Derrida himself, pushing the devices and cyphers further, i.e. into a future untouched by memory or memorialization. As such, through these hackneyed deconstructive tools, these scholars condition the unexpected, the danger, the unknown to still unsettle all assurances of the same, all complacent discourses, all secured philosophy. Their well-honed deconstructive instruments thus maintain the discursive sphere open, inviting readers to ponder on the strategy of preventing both topics from closing in on themselves.

Inevitably, there is also another form of respect in the preceding essays: a respect for Africa. This is a strange and unusual form of respect because Africa is here not something lived, but reflected upon. Besides the very concrete account of the use of the hashtag #RhodesMustFall (Steyn), there are very few accounts of life in Africa. Although Derrida hails *from* Africa, his scholars don't seem to be that interested in Africa's daily and mundane lived experiences. But this should not be seen as if these authors are just abstract thinkers uninterested in the banalities of the daily events of an entire continent. On the contrary, these essayists all attempt to give Africa its due, to be fair to its heterogeneity and multifaceted expressions. This is evident in the way that at no point in

the previous essays there is an attempt to define Africa, to identify it as this or that (“Sub-Saharan,” for example) or to determine it thematically or theoretically once and for all. Africa remains like Derrida’s thought open, “to come” (*à-venir*). Africa can never be settled (Farred). Africa can only remain to be thought (Farred). Africa can only be understood as a haunting (Janz). Africa is necessarily always already uprooted (Drabinski). Africa is necessarily an end which is also a beginning (Bragg, Kavwahirehi), etc. As such, the respect that these scholars show to Africa is to avoid all easy reductionism and letting “it” be; to ac-knowledge that a vast set of countries on earth, each with trillions of events taking place every second of time, is always already structured as futural. The conditioning here is as strong as it possibly can.

Finally, respect for Africa also comes in the way the above writers focus on specific aspects of Africa that Derrida himself did not address in his life-time. The idea here is not to shame Derrida in not having spoken or written about African issues while he was alive (his silence on the Rwandan Genocide, for example, is a case in point), but to encourage a Derridean thinking of Africa so as to demonstrate not only that his thought and his deconstructive methods are still relevant, but that they are *necessary* to carry on making sense of Africa. Can we make sense, for example, of violence in South Africa without the openness of thought that Derrida advocates for? Can we make sense, to take another example, of the legacy of colonialism without the suggestion that any thought on this legacy is necessarily structured by a conditioning of the alterity of the other? Can we make sense of all the clichés about Africa (rhythm, orality, for example) without taking on board Derrida’s necessary ac-knowledgement, this trajectory of thought that never settles, thus leaving the clichés suspended as if in mid-air, uncertain, questionable? If the answer is yes, then fascism, totalitarianism, chauvinism, and racism are our lot. If the answer is no, then all African issues (past, present, or future) remain somewhat

unaddressed, their radical alterity staying if not secured, at least conditioned a little longer still.

And the same is true for the preceding essays and the way they will be read. If the outcome of this future reading is: “this essay is good,” “this essay is bad,” then dogmatism, doctrinairism, and disciplinarian divisions continue to reign supreme. This edited collection of essays on Derrida in/and Africa becomes foreclosed, unredeemable, already obsolete, yet another dusty book abandoned on a library shelf. If the outcome is, on the contrary, a renewed pledge to keep the reader in mystery, then everything is not lost, something manages to somehow resist the violence of judgement. The book will then on occasion elicit further reflexions and additional debates on this man in/and this continent, their cultures and their manifold trajectories. In between the two, there will always be, *of course*, many forms of disrespect, many contemptuous “no” to both topics, many passing-byes without a glance towards this, no doubt, already dusty library book. But who really will dare to say “no” to both the man who once lived in Paris and/or this continent of over a billion people? Who will be mad enough to avoid this invitation to continue thought or to ignore the conditioning of the very radical alterity of the other? However much future readers can and will steer clear of this edited collection of essays, respect will still somehow prevail. Thought will continue its a-destinal trajectory.

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1. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. by Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 182. Henceforth abbreviated as Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics.”
  2. This variance occurs mainly in the section entitled “On Ontological Violence,” in Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 167-92.
  3. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 172.

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." Translated by Alan Bass. In *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 2001), 97-192.