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Africa in Van Norden's Philosophical Manifesto and King's Multicultural Canon

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Although written from an American setting, and pointedly directed at challenging the pedagogic modalities and epistemological assumptions of the organisation of the philosophy curriculum in the United States, Bryan W. Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017) has an acute and timely resonance with the current fractious debate on the decolonisation of the philosophy curriculum in South Africa.

It is indeed a scandal that African philosophy, in Africa, is still what Van Norden (p.2) formulates as an LCTP (less commonly taught philosophies). Equally, as one stuck in the racialistic trenches of this debate (Lamola 2018, Benatar 2018), it was comforting to hear a non-radical voice of Jay L. Garfield assert in the book's Foreword that 'ignoring non-Western Philosophy in our research, curriculum, and hiring decisions is deeply racist' (xix).

In addition, Van Norden's critique of the Eurocentrism of the philosophy canon and syllabi not only validates a founding motif of post-colonial African philosophy; it foregrounds into the American academe a protestation, stated in Barry Hallen's words in his *A Short History of African Philosophy*, against the 'West that ethnocentrically flaunts that culture's philosophical priorities as things that should be universal' (Hallen 2009,50).

A Model for Philosophers' Practice: Peter J. King

The foregoing sentiments have impelled me to endeavour a contribution to this book symposium from the vantage position of African philosophical experience. In doing so, I propose to draw attention to a project which, in our view, experimented and proved that what Van Norden is advocating can be done.

This was the publication in 2004 by Peter J. King, lecturer at Pembroke College, Oxford of *One Hundred Philosophers: The Life and Work of the World's Greatest Thinkers*. In line with Van Norden's disquisition, King (2004) creatively broke the boundaries of the traditional canonical criteria of Western Philosophy, and installed into a singular chronological compendium thinkers from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas as philosophers whose works set the frontiers of philosophic erudition.

I published polemic essay that extolled the instructive intervention of this book, 'Peter J. King and the Transformation of the Philosophical Canon: An Africanist Appreciation' (Lamola 2015) in *Phronimon*, a journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and Humanities.¹

In the *Phronimon* article I argued that the conceptual framework of 'epistemic pluriversalism' as advanced by Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo (2009, 1-23) is a cogent theoretical basis against which King's work could best be appreciated. I propose, similarly, that Van Norden's transformation program could be grounded on such a corrective paradigm against the globalistic *universalism* of the West. *Pluriversalism*, whereby all knowledge systems as

¹ Parts of this submission are revised paragraphs from this *Phronimon* article.

J. Lamola

emerging from diverse geo-cultural regions of the world are accorded equal recognition and respect, is a critical transformative imperative for contemporary academic philosophy.

Here, for reasons of brevity, our restricted mission is to carve a space for African philosophy in Van Norden's regrettably excessively pro-Chinese philosophy blueprint of a transformative multicultural curriculum.

Africans in the Global Philosophy Canon

As Van Norden would, I was perturbed to find one of the editors of the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (1983), Antony Flew, justify his criteria for the choice of entries in the dictionary with these words,

Very little attention is given to anything that is philosophical only in the more popular interpretation. This, and not European parochialism, is why the classics of Chinese philosophy get such short shrift. The *Analects* of Confucius and the *Book of Mencius* are both splendid of their kind. But neither sage shows much sign of interest in the sort of questions thrashed out in *Theaetetus*. (Flew and Speakes 1983, xi)

In this justification of the preferential adoption of the epistemology of Plato's Socrates as the criterion for the canon on epistemology, in essence, Flew claimed that the Western *modus cogens* is more advanced than the Chinese one and is of a superior quality in deciphering, judging, and resolving the dilemmas of human life.

It is regrettable that Flew (1923-2010) did not live long enough to see Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World: the end of the western world and the birth of a new global order* (2012), and Jared Diamond's *The World until Yesterday: what can we learn from traditional societies* (2012).

This 'comparative anthropology' that condescendingly judges the world's cultures against the putative superiority of Anglo-European traditions is much harsher in its judgement of African systems of thought. There is no reference to African philosophy or any of its themes in the *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Flew, above, sounded like Immanuel Kant who wrote in *Observations on the feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) that:

If we cast a fleeting glance over the other parts of the world, we find the Arab the noblest man in the Orient . . . he is hospitable, generous and truthful . . . if the Arabs, so to speak are the Spaniards of the Orient, similarly the Persians are the French of Asia. They are good poets, courteous and of fairly fine taste . . . The Japanese could in a way be regarded as Englishmen of this part of the world, but hardly in any other quality than their resoluteness . . . The Negroes of Africa, on the other hand, have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. (in Eze 1997, 54-55)

In succession to Kant, G.W.F. Hegel's notorious Afrophobic history of philosophy is not even worth recounting. It is aptly contextualised in Peter K. J. Park's *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy; racism in the formation of the philosophical canon, 1780-1830*, as cited by Van Norden (19). In a recent review of an African philosophy text in SERRC, refuting this claimed absence of Africa in the history of philosophy by making reference to the

monumental research of Chiekh Anta Diop ([1954] 1974) and Martin Bernal (1987), Anke Grannes alerts that:

There is a long tradition of written philosophy on the African continent, extending from the time of the ancient Egyptians and including Ethiopian philosophy, the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition in Africa south of the Sahara, the Ajami tradition, and the written tradition in the Swahili culture (Grannes 2018, 45).

Choosing Ignorance of Africa

In the year 2012 two books were published in London with a proclaimed ambition at presenting definitive compendia of those identified as the thinkers who the whole of contemporary humanity must regard as the producers of the most profound ideas that continue to shape our lives and world.

The first of these canon-forming publications was Stephen Trombley's *Fifty Thinkers Who Shaped the Modern World* (2012). The second was Phillip Stokes' *Philosophy: One Hundred Essential Thinkers* (2012) which according to its jacket promotion, 'introduces one hundred of the world's greatest philosophers'.

Trombley's fifty thinkers who shaped the modern world are led by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and have the Bulgarian-French feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva (1941-), on the fiftieth spot. According to Trombley's selection, not a single mind outside of Europe and the United States of America merits a place in the top fifty that has shaped the modern world. He could even blithely aver that

The Greek philosopher was a wealthy, upper-class man whose leisure time was purchased with slave labour... We can compare the situation of philosophy in ancient Greek with our time, in which—despite the fact that more philosophers may be women or people of colour or from modest social origins—it remains a profession dominated by white men (Trombley 2012 11)

On the other hand, Stoke's one hundred of the world's greatest philosophers who have produced 'the ideas that have shaped our world', predictably, starts off with Thales of Miletus, and ends with American logician, Willard Van Orman Quine (1908-2000).

Without a declaration anywhere that the book's proscribed scope is on the Western Philosophical tradition and academy, thus maintaining a pretence of encyclopaedic universality, in *Anno Domini* 2012 Stokes could not find any Chinese, Indian or African philosopher worthy of recognition for a contribution to the ideas that have shaped or are continuing to shape our world.

Even Kwame Nkrumah, a trained and published philosopher who incarnated his ideas into the Presidency of the first African nation to achieve independence from colonial rule, thus

setting a trend and inspiration for the seismic independence movements that dominated the discourse of international politics for decades, is not recognised.

A year earlier, in an implicit demonstration of a growing consciousness against the interpretation of philosophy as Reason conscious of itself and evolving through European institutions, Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass' truly multicultural and global *Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (2011)² had been published. But Trombley and Stokes were to testify to the enduring force of the *interpretatio hegeliana*, that views Europe as the exclusive fountain and Eden of human reason to which Africa does not exist.

King's Pluriversal Historiography

King's multicultural rendition of the protagonists in the history of philosophy negates this Eurocentrism as an active theoretical intervention, and in our assessment precociously fulfilled and demonstrated the efficacy of Van Norden's manifesto.

His selection of his 'one hundred philosophers' is presented in a sequence that is only governed by their year of birth. In this way the tradition of presenting the history of philosophy as some kind of progressively successive schools, the *interpretatio hegeliana*, is obviated. Simultaneously, through this structure, the particularity of cultural categorisation is trumped by the universality of time.

This birth date sequencing delivers a pantheon that starts off with Thales of Miletus, seamlessly gliding through K'Ung fu-zi (Confucius) and Lao Zi, both Chinese philosophers, before it gets to Plato. This introduction of ancient sages is rounded off with the profile of the work and life of an *African* woman philosopher, Hypatia of Alexandria (c.415-370 BCE). King's compendium boasts uncharacteristic profiling of women thinkers, and draws attention to the injustice women have historically suffered and continue to endure in academic philosophy.

In selecting a constellation of noteworthy thinkers during the period 500CE-1599CE, which in Western historiography is styled the Medieval Period, King endeavours to set these thinkers against a broader appreciation of global historical developments. They are for instance set against the background of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad PUN (570CE), and the appearance of the first printed book from China in 868CE.

Ancius M.S Boethius of Rome (480-524) the martyred pioneering translator of ancient Greek philosophical works into Latin, and Adi Samkra of Kerala (781-820), the founder of the *adviata* school of Hindu philosophy are introduced as equal pioneering thinkers at the start of this period. In a historical rendition that attempts to present a just procession of religious thought, the narration of the philosophical heritage of the Irish Church philosopher, John Scotus Erigena (810-977) is placed after that of the Muslim philosopher Abu-Yusuf Yaqub Ibn Ishuq of Baghdad (801-873).

² See Garfield and Edelglass 2011,461-533 'Philosophy in Africa and the Diaspora edited by Albert Mosley and Stephen C. Fergusson II.'

Skipping to the modern period, in the interest of the demand for brevity in our demonstration of the cultural and epistemological plurality of King's philosophical canon, we note the exceptional gesture he makes in contributing to the uncovering of Anthony William Amo (1703-1784), the Ghanaian who graduated in philosophy at the University of Wittenberg in 1734, and proceeded to earn an appointment as Philosophy professor at the University of Jena in 1740.

Amo, who advanced scholarship on Descartes, is perked between George Berkeley and Baron de Montesquieu as notable philosophers of the Early Modern Period of Western philosophy. King's presentation, which due to its chronological approach has to list Amo before David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), unwittingly exposes the bigotry of the latter two celebrated luminaries of the Western philosophical canon in their assiduously recorded views that there is no empirical evidence of any genius among 'the Negro' (see Eze 1997, 29-30).

While the government clerk David Hume was battling with his 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature* that 'fell dead from the press' (King 2004, 108), Professor Amo had just successfully published in 1738 *Treatise on the Art of Philosophising Soberly and Accurately* (King 2004, 103).

King's treatment of twentieth century evolution of philosophy subverts traditional reading of a linkage of the philosophies of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein by inserting between them an account of the works of Servedi Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), the most celebrated exponent of Indian philosophy who was elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1939, and of Sir Muhammad Iqbal Khan (1877-1938), the iconic philosopher of Islam and graduate of Russell's *alma mater*, Cambridge. In a rare irony, the 'heterodoxical' Khan was knighted by King George V in 1922, whilst Russell was persecuted and ostracised in England for his 'unorthodox' beliefs.

King (2004) interrupts his presentation of the twentieth century notable philosophical minds with an editorial chapter titled, 'Overview: African philosophy'. This is one of ten such topical editorial insertions interspersed between his encyclopaedic profiling of his selected philosophers. This overview lays the ground for his recognition of Kwasi Wiredu (1931-) as one of the world's one hundred greatest thinkers.

Notwithstanding this recognition of only Wiredu and the introduction of Amo, he accords African philosophy a rare appearance on the stage of global intellectual traditions. It is significant that this 'Overview: African philosophy' (King 2004, 172) is simply a neat summation of Henry Odera Oruka's famous 1981 paper 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy' (in Coetzee & Roux 2002, 120-136). King, in line with Van Norden's broader and more contemporaneous pleadings, seems to have taken seriously Oruka's contention that:

Philosophy as a discipline that employs analytical, reflective, and ratiocative methodology is therefore not seen as a monopoly of Europe or any one race but as

J. Lamola

an activity for which every race or people has a potentiality (in Coetzee & Roux 2002, 120) .

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