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Part II

ALTERNATIVE
TRADITIONS

10

RIGHTS, RACE, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN AFRICANA PHILOSOPHY

Chike Jeffers

Western race-thinking didn't just happen to emerge as Europe became modern. Modernity and Race helped bring each other into being, and they sustained and spurred each other through different stages of development . . . [P]erhaps the most successful racializing institution in history prepared the way for today's global economy: the transnational exchange markets and financial frameworks of global capitalism cut their teeth on the transatlantic slave trade.

(Taylor 2013: 23–24)

Paul Taylor's description of a symbiotic, foundational, and co-constitutive relationship between race and modernity provocatively challenges us to avoid studying either of these two things without giving thought to the other. This chapter will explore the race-modernity connection by examining key moments in the history of philosophical thought in Africa and the African diaspora. I will discuss four thinkers who can be viewed as founding figures of modern Africana philosophy, drawing attention to the ways in which the concept of rights can be seen as significant for each of them. Taylor's guidance on how to think about race and modernity helps us to see this pattern of interest in rights as unsurprising, for if modernity is partly constituted by the conceptualization and institutionalization of racial differences, with the latter processes prominently involving the dehumanization and subjugation of African peoples, it is not surprising that Africana thinkers in the modern era would be especially invested in a discourse revolving around notions of freedom and equality.

In the first section of this chapter, however, I will raise questions about how tightly we should tie modernity, rights, and race together in the story of Africana philosophy through a discussion of Zera Yacob, a seventeenth-century Ethiopian thinker. Zera Yacob criticizes the practice of slavery with an argument that appears to make him a theorist of natural rights similar to John Locke, but it is not clear that he thought about race at all. By contrast, the thinkers I discuss in the second, third, and fourth sections of the chapter (Anton Wilhelm Amo, Lemuel Haynes, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, respectively) undoubtedly thought about race and, indeed, developed theories of natural rights (in the cases of Haynes and Cugoano) or conventional rights (in Amo's case)

with an eye toward addressing anti-black racial oppression. These three thinkers may thus be seen as founders of modern Africana philosophy in precisely the ways for which Taylor prepares us. I will conclude by explaining why Cugoano represents the most intriguing and instructive case of all.

Zera Yacob, Early Modern Ethiopia, and Natural Rights

Zera Yacob's *Hatäta*, or "inquiry," commonly called his *Treatise* (Sumner 1985), begins with an account of his birth in 1599 in the city of Axum and his education, which led him to become a teacher. After being falsely portrayed to the emperor as seditious, he fled Axum and lived for two years in a cave. The thoughts he had in this cave represent the bulk of his treatise. He reflects, most prominently, on religious disagreement: How does one know whether those who interpret things in accordance with the Ethiopian Orthodox version of Christianity are right, as opposed to those who believe in the Roman Catholicism brought to Ethiopia by Jesuits from the Iberian peninsula? How does one judge whether the Muslims or the Jews have it right? Zera Yacob's reasoning leads him to conclude that the way to truth is not through accepting any particular religious viewpoint but rather through relying upon one's own reason.

In light of this position, he subjects the claims of various religions to critical scrutiny, rejecting as of human rather than divine origin anything that he finds does not comport with reason. For example, all of the Abrahamic religions are criticized for encouraging fasting, as eating is how we survive and thus not eating for significant periods of time is irrational. Toward the end of the treatise, returning to autobiography, he tells of how he left the cave and settled in the town of Enfraz, where he worked as a scribe for a rich man and taught the man's two sons. One of those sons was Walda Heywat, who became a kind of disciple of Zera Yacob and at whose request Zera Yacob's *Hatäta* was written in 1667. Walda Heywat also wrote a treatise of his own, and its preface reports the peaceful death of Zera Yacob in 1692.

Claude Sumner has commented upon the significance of the *Hatäta* by saying that "MODERN PHILOSOPHY, in the sense of a personal rationalistic critical investigation, BEGAN IN ETHIOPIA with *Zär'a Ya'äqob* at the same time as in England and in France" (1985: 227). This is a bold yet plausible claim. There are at least two reasons that, jointly, make it illuminating to view Zera Yacob as a pioneering modern philosopher, the first in the Africana tradition. The first, evoked by Sumner, has to do with the fruitfulness of comparing his approach to philosophy to that of thinkers living at the same time, such as Descartes. Consider this representative passage on the importance of Descartes by Jeffrey Tlumak:

Descartes' philosophy embodies the central, modern idea that each person can discover which beliefs are true, and what actions are right, without imposition of outside authority. But his individualism is especially radical. He pursues truth in the solitude of his own thinking, using extreme doubt as a vital tool.
(2007: 1)

It is striking that we could substitute Zera Yacob's name for Descartes's own in this passage and it would remain a very appropriate description.

This reason for describing Zera Yacob's treatise as modern philosophy, however, seems insufficient to me, for if we were to discover a text from, say, fifth-century Ethiopia in

which a similar combination of suspicion of religious authority and trust in reason were expressed, I might say that it surprisingly anticipates modern themes but I would not classify it as modern. A second, linked reason to classify Zera Yacob as modern, then, involves the usefulness of understanding his historical context as part of an evolving *early modern world*. As Jerry Bentley (2007) tells us, a number of historians have worked to extend the concept of early modernity from its initial application in European history to a global scope. To distinguish the period, Bentley writes: “by the term *early modern world* I mean the era about 1500 to 1800, when cross-cultural interactions increasingly linked the fates and fortunes of peoples throughout the world, but before national states, mechanized industry, and industrial-strength imperialism decisively changed the dynamics governing the development of world history” (2007: 22).

Zera Yacob’s Ethiopia exemplifies the distinctiveness of this period as an era of global history. The presence of Jesuits in Ethiopia is an example of the kind of long-range cross-cultural interaction that Bentley identifies as newly common in early modernity. In 1543, Portugal aided Ethiopia in repelling an invasion by Somali Muslim forces, who were in turn backed by the Ottoman Empire. This military assistance helped lay the groundwork for Iberian Jesuit influence at Ethiopia’s royal court, leading eventually to King Susenyos’s conversion in 1622. The king then declared Catholicism the state religion, thus replacing the Ethiopian Orthodox faith that dated back to the fourth century. Zera Yacob’s flight from Axum was caused by an enemy of his falsely claiming that he had been encouraging rebellion against the king in defense of the ancient faith. There was, indeed, much resistance and King Susenyos was forced to declare religious liberty in 1632. After he abdicated power in favor of his son, Fasiladas, the latter promptly re-established the Orthodox Church as state religion and soon expelled the Jesuits.

This context of religious conflict gave rise to Zera Yacob’s reflections on truth and knowledge, just as religious conflict shaped early modern Europe in ways affecting the development of modern philosophy there. John Marshall (2006) clarifies what gave rise to Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, for example, by describing in detail the forms and levels of religious intolerance in France, England, and the Netherlands. When the broad historical context of the early modern world is taken into account, the thematic connections we can draw between Zera Yacob and Locke’s concerns with freedom of conscience appear less accidental. It is thus quite illuminating to count the *Hatäta* as a paradigmatic work of modern philosophy.

Let us turn now to the topic of rights. As far as I know, Zera Yacob does not use any word in Ge’ez (the traditional literary language of Ethiopia, in which his treatise is written) that can be said to correspond directly to our term “rights.” In his fifth chapter, though, Zera Yacob criticizes Islam by arguing for the wrongness of slavery in a manner nicely illuminated by ascribing to him a belief in natural rights. He writes:

Likewise the [Muslims] said that it is right to go and buy a man as if he were an animal. But with our intelligence we understand that this [Muslim] law cannot come from the creator of man who made us equal, like brothers, so that we call our creator our father. But Mohammed made the weaker man the possession of the stronger and equated a rational creature with irrational animals; can this depravity be attributed to God?

(Sumner 1985: 238)

Compare this with Locke's explanation in his *Second Treatise of Government* of why, even in a state of nature, we are bound by reason to recognize each other as having rights to life, health, liberty, and our possessions:

For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's Pleasure. And being furnished with like Faculties, sharing all in one Community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such *Subordination* among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours.

(1988 [1689]: 271)

Despite various differences, we find in both passages a description of a natural order in which God is superior to us while we are superior to nonhuman animals. Our place in the middle of this hierarchy secures our natural freedom and equality. None of us can claim superiority over each other as our Creator can over us and, while other creatures may be made to serve our purposes, we can recognize our special standing in the order of creation—and thus our right to be free from coercion—by recognizing our shared capacity for rational thought.

What should we make of this similarity? Note that it would be anachronistic to describe Zera Yacob's argument as "Lockean," for the *Second Treatise of Government* was published over two decades after Zera Yacob wrote his *Hatäta*. This points us toward the limits on the usefulness of viewing Zera Yacob and Locke as sharing an early modern world. Consider Richard Tuck's *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (1979), which explores categories of Roman law, locates the birth of natural rights discourse in the late medieval period, and examines figures like Hugo Grotius, John Selden, and Thomas Hobbes before giving Locke attention in the final chapter. Scholarship like this places Locke in a certain lineage of thought, which shaped him just as much as the political context of his times. Zera Yacob does not stand in that lineage. Indeed, when comparing Zera Yacob to Descartes and Locke, we should remember that Locke read and was influenced by Descartes, learning from his approach to philosophy even while rejecting central views of his. There is a sense in which Locke and Descartes share a modernity that Zera Yacob does not, a point that need not lead us to deny that Zera Yacob is a modern philosopher but rather to say that he inhabits a *different modernity*.

It is furthermore noteworthy that, when he criticizes slavery, Zera Yacob is not talking about the transatlantic slave trade and the treatment of Africans by Europeans but rather his understanding of the precepts of Islam. Bentley's point about the early modern world being before "industrial-strength imperialism" is apt here, as Zera Yacob's experience of Europeans was an experience of powerful outsiders but not of conquering or would-be conquering subjugators (as compared with Ethiopians of the nineteenth century, who experienced a punitive expedition by the British and an attempted invasion by the Italians, or Ethiopians of the twentieth century, who experienced Italian occupation). Rather than relations of domination between races, Zera Yacob's sense of what divides humanity involves, above all, religious differences.

In fact, it seems fair to say that it is not simply that religion matters more than race to Zera Yacob but rather that, for Zera Yacob, race as we know it does not exist. One might think there is a kind of racial distinction involved in the way that he refers to Jesuits as “*Franġ*,” a Ge’ez word that literally means “foreigner.” But note that he uses that word in a way that is interchangeable with “Catholic” and in a way that contrasts not with a term for people from Ethiopia but rather with a term translated into English as “Copt.” His use of this term is clearly rooted in the fact that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was at that time administratively underneath the Coptic Church of Egypt. Consider now this passage from chapter 2:

And while I was teaching and interpreting the Books, I used to say: “The *Franġ* say this and this” or “The Copts say that and that,” and I did not say: “This is good, that is bad,” but I said: “All these things are good if we ourselves are good.” Hence I was disliked by all: the Copts took me for a *Franġ*, the *Franġ* for a Copt.

(Sumner 1985: 231)

Clearly the problem was not that some people viewed Zera Yacob as a European foreigner. The label “foreigner,” rather, is being treated as interchangeable with a religious position that anyone can take up, demonstrating that the idea of a racial divide here is simply absent. Modern Africana philosophy as pioneered by Zera Yacob is thus, in important ways, *disconnected* from European modernity, both from its specific lineages of thought and from the sharp racial distinctions created by the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas.

Anton Wilhelm Amo, the Holy Roman Empire, and Conventional Rights

Anton Wilhelm Amo was born in 1703 in Axim (not to be confused with Axum) in what is today Ghana. Given that the country of Ghana only came into being in 1957, we may call the region in which he was born Nzemaland. The Nzema are one of the subgroups of the Akan people, who make up about half the population of Ghana today. Amo was no more than four years old when he was taken from his homeland to the Netherlands, probably by the Dutch West India Company. This corporation was a major player in the slave trade, but it has been argued that Amo may have been taken not as a slave but to be trained for missionary purposes. He was brought to what is now Germany and given to Duke Anton Ulrich, who reigned over the principality of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. He was baptized, received the name Anton Wilhelm, and an education good enough that, in 1727, he was able to enroll in the University of Halle, which had become a center of Enlightenment through the presence of luminaries such as Christian Wolff. He studied law and defended a dissertation that is now unfortunately lost, although it will, nevertheless, be the central focus of this section.

From Halle, Amo went to the University of Wittenberg, where he attained the degree of doctor of philosophy and, in 1734, defended a second dissertation titled *De Humanae Mentis Απάθεια* (“On the Apathy of the Human Mind”). One important feature of this work is its critique of Descartes on the precise relationship between mind

and body. Note here the contrast with Zera Yacob: while Zera Yacob can be seen as similar to Descartes but must be recognized as outside the lineage leading to and branching out from him, Amo, like Locke, did philosophy in the wake of Descartes and critically responded to his work. Amo taught at Wittenberg, Halle, and also the University of Jena. Then, at some point before 1753, he left Europe and returned to his place of birth, possibly as a result of experienced hostility in Europe. It is in 1753 that a Dutch physician visiting Axim met with him, later reporting that he lived there “like a hermit” and had “acquired the reputation of a soothsayer” (Abraham 2004: 198). He was said to be in touch with his father and sister, but a brother of his had been sold into slavery in Suriname. We cannot be sure when Amo died.

Let us now reflect upon his first dissertation, which he defended in 1729. It is a shame we cannot read it, as I consider it the first known work of Africana political philosophy in a European language. Its title was *De Jure Maurorum in Europa* (“On the Rights of the Moors in Europe”). While we lack the text itself, we have this description of it from the university journal at Halle:

In it, not only has he shown from law and history that the kings of the Moors were once enfeoffed by the Roman Emperor, and that every one of them had to obtain a royal patent, which Justinian also issued, but he also especially investigated how far the freedom or servitude of Moors purchased by Christians extends in Europe according to the commonly accepted laws.

(Abraham 2004: 192; translation altered)

There is much in this description that makes one curious to see the work itself. For example, who are all these kings supposedly made vassal to the Roman emperor? The Roman Empire never covered more than North Africa, and while some usages of the term “Moor” would fit with a focus on North Africa, the topic of servitude to Europeans clearly suggests that Amo is concerned with “Moors” in the broader sense in which he counts as one (note that he is referred to in his baptismal record as “a little Moor” and, at the time of his confirmation in 1721, his last name was recorded not as “Amo” but “Mohre”) (Abraham 1996: 427). If we assume that Amo did not make the blatantly false claim that all kingdoms throughout Africa were incorporated into the Roman Empire as a matter of historical fact, could it be that it is precisely the linguistic fact that we only speak of “Africa” and “Africans” because the name of the Roman province of Africa was extended to cover the continent in its entirety that justifies, in his view, treating the continent as a whole as heir to the legal legacy of ancient Rome?

Whatever the answer to this question, it is fascinating to note that Amo’s dissertation addresses the question of slavery not by appealing, as Zera Yacob does, to an account of natural rights, but rather to an account of *conventional* rights. He relies solely on what has been accepted legally and historically to argue for a shift in the dominant viewpoint regarding the enslavement of Africans. But what exactly is this shift? William Abraham plausibly states that the “kernel of Amo’s argument was that Africans were entitled to the same immunities and privileges to precisely the extent that the erstwhile European vassals of Rome enjoyed them, for the African kings had been likewise subject to Rome” (1996: 430). But which immunities and privileges? Abraham writes of Roman law providing for “the inviolability of the person” and claims that Amo relies on this to imply the illegality of slavery (1996: 430). But, as Amo certainly would have known, Roman

law did not render slavery illegal. Justinian's *Institutes*, for example, although notably including the claim that slavery is "contrary to the law of nature," provides rules and regulations surrounding the practice in full acceptance of its role in civil society (Justinian 1987 [533]: 37). And, of course, as we have noted, Amo relies not on natural rights but legal convention to make his argument. Although I have seen no scholar admit this before, it is the case that, for all we know, Amo may have countenanced some compatibility between slavery and the law, for the description of his thesis does not clarify what he sees as the legal limitations on servitude.

Nevertheless, I think there is good reason to speculate that Amo's purpose was to argue for the abolition of slavery in Europe. The reason I have in mind requires that we once again pay attention to what portion of the early modern world provided the immediate context for and thus shaped the intellectual activity of the thinker in question. Amo was raised, educated, and worked as a philosopher within the Holy Roman Empire, that conglomeration of mainly Germanic territories that is often traced back to the rule of Charlemagne in the ninth century and which lasted until the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unlike in ancient Rome, Europeans were not held as slaves in the Holy Roman Empire of Amo's time. My speculation, then, is that Amo aimed to rely not on the legal status of slavery in ancient Rome but on the practices surrounding slavery in his own milieu. The point of talking about the ancient Roman incorporation of Africa, in that case, would be to exploit the self-understanding of the Holy Roman Empire as the continuation of the ancient Roman Empire and specifically of the Christian Roman Empire inaugurated by Constantine and later ruled by Justinian, who actually recovered African territory previously lost to Vandals during his rule in the sixth century. The argument would thus be that the evolution toward freedom from slavery in Europe legally applies to Africans as well once we recognize Europe and Africa as parallel geopolitical spaces emerging from a shared history of Roman imperial rule, a political legacy that the Holy Roman Empire sought to embody and extend.

Having noticed the contrast between Zera Yacob's focus on natural rights and Amo's on conventional rights, we must now acknowledge the difference between them with regard to thinking about race. While race arguably does not exist for Zera Yacob, Amo's rights-based argument against slavery is race-conscious at least in its motivation, as it aims to address the system of anti-black oppression that so thoroughly shaped his world, even if he himself was never a slave. That being said, while we might describe Zera Yacob's argument against slavery as *non-racial*, Amo's argument can be described as *deracializing* in aspiration. Confronted by a divide between and a hierarchy of white and black on the basis of a booming trade in slaves, he responded by evoking the common subjugation of Europeans and Africans to Roman imperial power. The picture of Europe and Africa suggested by his thesis is characterized not by racial difference but rather by legal and political continuity.

There is a paradox here, though. Amo deracializes Europeans and Africans by adopting a particularly European point of view on the world. Africa is viewed from the perspective of the Roman Empire, understood as the foundation of modern Europe. Indeed, it is shocking to think that an African would treat the conquest of Africa by a European empire as the basis of African freedom! Lewis Gordon has noted that Amo chose to "emphasize the significance of his Africanness" given that he often included "Afer" when signing his name (2008: 38). But the use of "Afer" in one's name was a

Latin convention originally identifying the bearer as being from the Roman province of Africa, centered around Carthage in present-day Tunisia. Thus even Amo's expression of African pride involved identifying with ancient Rome. He represents the founding of modern Africana philosophy as thoroughly shaped by European modernity.

Lemuel Haynes, Revolutionary America, and Natural Rights

Lemuel Haynes is the first and only of the four philosophers I am discussing to have been born outside Africa. He was born in 1753 in West Hartford, Connecticut, to a white mother and a black father, who was said to be "of unmingled extraction" and possibly a slave (Roberts 1994: 576). He never knew his father and did not grow up with his mother, but rather as an indentured servant with a family in Granville, Massachusetts. Despite the lack of freedom inherent in this condition, he was treated as a valued member of this family, whose strongly religious character moulded him as he pursued his largely self-directed education. At 21, shortly after being freed from servitude, Haynes joined the American Revolution, enlisting first as a minuteman and participating in the Siege of Boston in 1775 and then, the next year, as a private in the Continental Army, reinforcing the troops at the captured Fort Ticonderoga. It is around this time that he produced his earliest writings, one of which will be the focus of this section. After the war, Haynes began to display a talent for delivering sermons. When he was ordained as a minister in 1785, he was likely the first black clergyman in the United States whose role was made official in this way. He began serving Congregationalist churches and, in 1788, accepted the call to pastor an all-white church in Rutland, Vermont. He served there for 30 years before being pushed out, partly on the basis of racism. Haynes continued to preach elsewhere until his death in 1833.

In parallel with Amo, Haynes is a figure of African background who managed to attain a position of recognized intellectual authority in an overwhelmingly European-dominated landscape during the era in which blackness in the West connoted, above all, slavery. One interesting thing about Haynes, though, is the way our memory of him has changed through discoveries made long after his death. Until the 1980s, it was reasonable for a historian who came across Haynes to be struck by his seeming avoidance of talk about race and slavery. He was, in his time, a respected minister with a Calvinist view of his faith, influenced in particular by a form of Calvinism known as the New Divinity, the roots of which lay in the thought of colonial America's famous philosopher-theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Haynes's most famous sermon, delivered in 1805, was a stinging rebuke of the Unitarian Universalism of his contemporary, Hosea Ballou. It is representative of most of his sermons in having no noticeable connection to his racial background.

In the early 1980s, however, Ruth Bogin discovered an unfinished, unpublished essay of his titled "Liberty Further Extended." While it is undated, it was very likely written in the second half of 1776, after the printing and circulation of the Declaration of Independence. Given that Amo's first dissertation is lost, it is the oldest philosophical text we possess arguing for an end to anti-black oppression that was written by a black thinker. It is also interesting to compare it to the other previously unknown writing of his that Bogin discovered: a poem called "The Battle of Lexington," likely written during his time as a minuteman in Boston. The poem, a "patriotic ballad," is an unadulterated celebration of the Patriot cause and indictment of the British (Bogin 1985). Haynes

even participates in the practice of speaking of “slaves” as what the British would have the Americans be, a condition to which they prefer death (Bogin 1985: 504). “Liberty Further Extended,” on the other hand, is a fiery critique of the hypocrisy of white Americans fighting for freedom while perpetuating slavery. Rita Roberts (1994) argues that the contrast between the poem and the essay show us the swift political evolution of a black soldier. As she puts it, “the victims of the ballad became the savage oppressors of the essay” (1994: 580).

Haynes’s commitment to natural rights discourse is front and center in the essay, as he writes early on that “[l]iberty, & freedom, is an innate principle” and identifies the source of this principle as God:

Liberty is a Jewel which was handed down to man from the cabinet of heaven, and is Coaeval with his Existence. And as it proceed[s] from the Supreme Legislature of the univ[er]s, so it is he which hath a sole right to take away; therefore, he that would take away a man’s Liberty assumes a prerogative that Belongs to another, and acts out of his domain.

(Bogin 1983: 94)

As with Zera Yacob and Locke, God’s superiority over us is the basis of our natural freedom. With this established, the goal of the essay is to argue that nothing about this principle differs when black people are involved—natural freedom is natural freedom. Haynes highlights that this is unfortunately controversial in a way that demonstrates the significance of his immediate political context:

To affirm, that an Englishman has a right to his Liberty, is a truth which has Been so clearly Evinced, Especially of Late, that to spend time in illustrating this, would be But Superfluous tautology. But I query, whether Liberty is so contracted a principle as to be Confin’d to any nation under Heaven; nay, I think it not hyperbolic to affirm, that Even an affrican, has Equally as good a right to his Liberty in common with Englishmen.

(Bogin 1983: 94)

Bogin claims that Haynes’s use of the term “Englishman” rather than “American” throughout the essay—even when he is clearly talking about people in the colonies or, rather, newly united states—is among the reasons to think that it was written in 1776, early in the Revolution (Bogin 1983: 90). While that may be true, the use of “Englishman” and “affrican” also helps to highlight ancestry in a way that makes the racial divide Haynes is confronting stand out, more than it would if he had used the term “American.” The effect is the suggestion that the Revolution has involved Englishmen fighting other Englishmen to affirm the freedom that all Englishmen rightfully claim while the Africans, who are not Englishmen, are wrongfully excluded. Haynes, unlike Amo, does not seek to ignore but rather directly confronts the racial divide.

In this way, Haynes reframes the Revolution and tempers excitement about it, despite being a participant or, perhaps, precisely because, as a participant who was also black, he had a clear sense of its strengths and weaknesses. I think “Liberty Further Extended,” despite being unfinished and unpublished, shows Haynes to be one of the great theorists of the American Revolution. Given that this is a quintessentially modern event,

Haynes as theorist of that event is as a paradigmatically modern thinker. But what does it mean to conceive of Haynes not just as modern but as a founding figure of modern *Africana* philosophy?

It occurs to me that a useful analogy can be drawn between “Liberty Further Extended” and a landmark feminist text like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written in 1792, shortly after the French Revolution. Cora Kaplan (1986) has described *Vindication* as an attempt to take advantage of the great excitement that the French Revolution caused among a certain segment of the British intelligentsia, herself included, in order to make progress on the status of women. Kaplan explains:

Arguments initially directed at a corrupt ruling class on behalf of a virtuous bourgeoisie inevitably opened up questions of intra-class power relations. With *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft challenged her own political camp, insisting that women’s rights be put higher on the radical agenda. Addressed to Talleyrand, taking issue with Rousseau, speaking the political jargon of her English contemporaries, *A Vindication* invited the enlightenment heritage, the dead and the living, to extend the new humanism to the other half of the race.

(1986: 37)

In other words, Wollstonecraft sought to transcend the limitations of European modernity as she knew it, not in order to pursue something outside European modernity but rather precisely because of her desire to push European modernity in its radical Enlightenment phase toward the ultimate fulfillment of its potential. This is how I see “Liberty Further Extended”: as an attempt to push the natural rights tradition further, given the contextually radical aim of attaining for people of African descent the freedom that this mode of thinking promised white people. Haynes cannot be seen as helping to inaugurate modern *Africana* philosophy by bringing a different intellectual heritage to the table. Rather, what Haynes brings to the table that is different is a missing concern, namely, concern for the group with which he was associated by means of his paternal ancestry. Modern *Africana* philosophy, as we see it in Haynes, is simply that outgrowth of modern European philosophy within which black people speak and black lives matter.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Fanti Culture, and Natural Rights

Like Amo, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was an Akan, specifically a Fanti, born in Ajumako in 1757. At the age of 13, he was kidnapped and sold for “a gun, a piece of cloth, and some lead” and then brought to Grenada as a slave (Cugoano 1999 [1787]: 14). After nine months there, he spent another year elsewhere in the West Indies before being brought to England in 1772. We do not know for certain how he gained his freedom, but his arrival in England took place after a significant ruling, known as the Mansfield decision, that was widely viewed as abolishing slavery within the nation. He eventually gained employment as a servant to painters Richard and Maria Cosway and, while employed by them, became active in the fight against the slave trade in 1780s London. In 1787, he published a book, the full title of which is *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*. He also published a shortened and revised version in 1791. Unfortunately, we do not know what became of him after this year.

Like Haynes, Cugoano is a natural rights theorist. Near the beginning of his book, Cugoano describes those who have come before him in writing against the slave trade and slavery as “[t]hose who have endeavoured to restore to their fellow-creatures the common rights of nature” (1999 [1787]: 9). Cugoano is even like Haynes in reflecting on the significance of the American Revolution, writing shortly thereafter: “since the last war, some mitigation of slavery has been obtained in some respective districts of America, though not in proportion to their own vaunted claims of freedom” (1999 [1787]: 10).

Note, however, a significant difference: while there is a powerful passage in “Liberty Further Extended” in which Haynes imagines the agony of a mother in Africa mourning the loss of a child to the slave trade, Cugoano did not need to use his imagination to reflect on life in Africa—only his memory. Unlike Amo, who was taken away as a small child, Cugoano had reached adolescence when snatched from his country. Until the age of 13, he lived immersed within Fanti culture. The short autobiographical portion of the book even includes interesting ethnographic information, such as when he says he lived somewhere for “about twenty moons” and then explains that this converts to two years (1999 [1787]: 12). Existing scholarship on Cugoano has, in my view, ignored what this immersion in Fanti culture means for thinking about Cugoano’s intellectual formation. It is my suspicion that we misunderstand much about Cugoano—including his argument for recognizing natural rights—if we fail to pay attention to his persistent attachment to his Fanti cultural background.

Consider first this claim he makes while rebutting caricatures of Africans as carelessly selling one another, even family members: “Those people annually brought away from Guinea [i.e., the West African coast], are born as free, and are brought up with as great a predilection for their own country, freedom and liberty, as the sons and daughters of fair Britain” (Cugoano 1999 [1787]: 27). On the one hand, what he says here may seem obvious: no one wants their freedom taken away. On the other hand, Cugoano undercuts here the common idea of Western life and thought as involving an inclination toward freedom unlike what can be found anywhere else, offering testimony as someone from elsewhere.

It is not, the case, however, that he sees no difference between Africans and Europeans and it is also not the case that he views them as equal in every possible way. We see this in a key passage dealing with how one recognizes whether slavery is wrong if one does not believe in divine revelation. Cugoano writes:

In that respect, all that they have to enquire into should be, whether it be right or wrong, that any part of the human species should enslave another; and when that is the case, the Africans, though not so learned, are just as wise as the Europeans; and when the matter is left to human wisdom, they are both liable to err. But what the light of nature, and the dictates of reason, when rightly considered, teach, is, that no man ought to enslave another; and some, who have been rightly guided thereby, have made noble defences for the universal natural rights and privileges of all men.

(1999 [1787]: 28)

I take it that “learning” here refers to something like modern Western attainments in science, industry, the spread of literacy, and so on, while “wisdom” means something

like rational capacity. Europeans may culturally exceed Africans with respect to “learning,” but Cugoano argues that Africans must be recognized as possessing equal rational capacity. Furthermore, he holds that “learning” is neither necessary nor sufficient for recognizing the existence of natural rights, as of two people, one with learning and one without, both are liable to err in not recognizing the category and both are capable of succeeding in recognizing it. We can explain this last point by connecting it to the equal desire for freedom Cugoano ascribes to us all. If we notice this feeling within ourselves and acknowledge the signs that others feel it as well, we may rationally arrive at the conclusion that we should treat others how we wish to be treated, that is, as free beings. Selfishness, however, may block this chain of reasoning and we may privilege our own feeling for freedom while ignoring that of others.

What I think this means is that, for Cugoano, as for Zera Yacob, the idea of natural rights is not really embedded within a modern European intellectual tradition. Certain formulations of it may be paradigmatically European, but it is ultimately a concept that transcends cultural boundaries, which also means that one can come up with paradigmatically Fanti formulations of it. Cugoano thus does not fit neatly into the framework of modern Africana philosophy as a form of modern European philosophy into which Amo and Haynes fit. But, of course, neither is he disconnected from the European tradition in the way Zera Yacob is. Cugoano, I believe, represents modern Africana philosophy as a convergence of African and European intellectual trajectories, a hybrid case of radicalizing European thought from within, as with Haynes, while also modernizing African thought through comparing indigenous and foreign viewpoints and using reason to decide what makes the most sense, like Zera Yacob.

I take Cugoano to be, in this way, a model for Africana philosophy going forward. The riches of the Western philosophical tradition must be valued but also made sharper and more liberating through the use of a critical philosophy of race lens. At the same time, there must be constant efforts to transcend the Western framework by rooting Africana philosophy in oral and literary traditions from Africa and the diaspora. In many instances, we may come to a conclusion like Cugoano’s about natural rights: that what we thought of as particularly Western is not and that the cross-cultural recognition of a shared concept may strengthen our sense of commitment to the value at stake.

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