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The Routledge Companion to  
Philosophy of Race



Edited by Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff,  
and Luvel Anderson

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# OF PROBLEM MODERNS AND EXCLUDED MODERNS

## On the Essential Hybridity of Modernity\*

*Olúfemi Táíwò*

The modern archives of the Euro-American philosophical tradition are not, generally speaking, kind to “the Rest of Us,” apologies to Chinweizu (1975). If you are, like me, African-descended, racially typed “black,” some of whose forebears were enslaved, most of whom are ex-colonized, but who possess a modicum of historical consciousness, reading, teaching, and writing about the leading lights of those archives cannot but be a fraught engagement, indeed.

There is a simple reason why our engagement with the canons of Euro-American philosophy is fraught with anxiety, resentment, self-doubt, and on occasion, sheer anger. This tradition, embodied in the works of its most influential thinkers, has furnished global white supremacy with its theoretical birth certificate, its philosophical credentials, and a long history of the sheer denial of the basic humanity of African-descended humans or, at the least, casting some serious doubt on our full membership in the human family.

However it is conceived, few now deny that racism is a standard feature of modern Euro-American philosophy, especially when it comes to its canonical thinkers. The only issue in debate is to establish the significance of race and racism in the philosophical output of the canonical thinkers. There are diverse approaches in the literature to this issue. There are those who argue that racism is basically incidental to and somewhat tangential to the philosophies. In other words, the integrity of the ideas and the philosophical systems that populate the tradition is not mortally, if at all, affected by the racism that many critics have identified. Others insist that racism plays a role in constructing their philosophical offerings and is, therefore, inseparable from their philosophies (see Valls 2005 for a representative collection).

The racism of modern Euro-American philosophy is not incidental. Given how much global white supremacy draws upon philosophy for its justification and much of its plausibility, especially in the popular imagination—pseudo-science<sup>1</sup> does the rest in this respect—it is not quite plausible that we should focus on the theories and systems and

ignore the racism. Simultaneously, I have serious difficulty with the claims often made by critics that (1) racism colors the canon's philosophies and (2) the philosophers/philosophies are racist. It is easier to grant the plausibility, veracity even, of these claims than it is to pin down what these claims mean and, more importantly, what they entail for our responses to them.

The claim that the philosophies are racism-inflected does not mean that the validity of their core arguments is diminished or otherwise undermined. This is not controversial. Furthermore, I am sure that however much the soundness of their arguments is adversely impacted by their racism, it is not the case that whatever truth their assertions contain is thereby extirpated. Above all, their racism has for the most part not been construed to require us to stop teaching them in our classes at all levels.

This last point has especial resonance for African-descended philosophy teachers. Unfortunately, I have to report that I have been unimpressed by what is on offer in much of the discussion of the questions identified above. Let me illustrate the point under review here. Several years ago, an African American student of mine reported to me what happened in an ethics class she was in, taught by a Caucasian American colleague. She had interjected into a class discussion the role, both as an investor and as a theoretical enabler, in the European slave trade and New World slavery played by John Locke. My colleague peremptorily shut down any possibility of an examination by the class of this line of inquiry by firmly proclaiming that Locke's personal behavior, including his investment choices, had no relevance to that ethics class. Obviously, my colleague also was convinced that his endorsement of slavery did not in any manner whatsoever impact his universalist proclamations in the *Two Treatises on Government*.<sup>2</sup> I would not be surprised if my then colleague remains typical when it comes to teaching Locke and modern philosophers in many of our philosophy departments at present. I do not know of many philosophy programs where we routinely explore such connections as standard approaches to teaching canonical or even "lesser" thinkers.

Let us instead substitute an African-descended professor in a similar class with the same query raised by a student of whatever epidermal inheritance. It is not clear to me that we can assume that this professor would have reacted differently. I know that this may sound counterintuitive to some, but I do not think that it is implausible.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we must stop thinking that the sheer descent from African roots immediately inclines one towards being an anti-racist warrior. Additionally, one could be an anti-racist warrior while, simultaneously, sharing the premises that racist arguments are built upon. Many in the analytic philosophy tradition fall into this category. This possibility is hardly ever entertained in much of the literature on philosophy and race. I shall be making more of this later in this essay.

Given that, historically, big or small, accidental or deliberate, much of the modern inflection of the Euro-American philosophical canon has very little that is positive, tasteful, or nice to say about African-descended peoples and cultures, what are we to do when we have to teach these same materials? This is where the difficulty I earlier spoke about comes into clear relief. When we, as we routinely do, establish the racism of the canon, what do we do next? This question applies to all who acknowledge the racism of the canon. It is much more poignant for us, African-descended workers in philosophy's vineyard, who nonetheless have to work with this tarnished inheritance.

In the rest of this chapter, I respond to this question from a vantage point that departs fundamentally from the dominant responses to the question abroad in much

of the literature. Generally speaking, the identification of the racism of the canonical thinkers and their texts in the modern Euro-American philosophical tradition is why we consider these thinkers “problem moderns.” What makes these thinkers and their ideas problematic?

It will not be wide of the mark to say that the canonical modern thinkers were embodiments, both literally and figuratively, of epochal hypocrisy. At the same time that they were putting together the modern template for freedom, they were forging the theoretical manacles for racialized chattel slavery that was unprecedented in the history of humanity and has had no peers anywhere else in the world since then. They have been shown to be adept at holding inconsistent positions even while they presented themselves as paragons of logical rigor (Popkin 1984). After all, it is on account of their much-heralded claim to primary, if not sole, ownership of reason that they dismissed our forebears as devoid of it and, therefore, of basic humanity, too. They were not beyond proclaiming falsehoods dressed with the patina of a pseudo-science<sup>4</sup> when it came to the human nature of those that they subjugated, imperialized, and dehumanized as a way of justifying their inhumane treatment of their victims. They globalized their local and universalized their provincialism while denying the capacity of the Rest of Us to capture and represent the universal in our own corners of the human experience (Táíwò 1998). Finally, they were not above making their claims true by fiat.

How have we responded to the phenomena associated with the problem moderns that I just iterated? This is where this essay proposes to chart a different path. Some distinctions are in order. We must separate different sets of responses. One set is made up of the responses of their own contemporaries. An example would be James Beattie’s response to David Hume or the Immanuel Kant vs. J.G. von Herder exchange (Eze 1997: chapters 3 and 5). The other set is made up of the critical literature that has built up since the original writings were first published. Here we include ongoing debates and controversies regarding the tarnished inheritance and its implications for all who have to work with it either in agreement or in opposition, or even in indifference (Valls 2005; Bernasconi and Lott 2000; Bernasconi 2001; Popkin 1980).

Among the latter responses, there are further subcategories. We argue with and seek to refute the principal claims of the canonical texts and thinkers. This is the most diffuse response in the literature. I will show, presently, why it is also quite problematic and severely limited. Then there are the debates and controversies among the critics themselves: for example, whether Emmanuel C. Eze overstated his case for the centrality of racism in the construction of Enlightenment philosophy, or whether Charles W. Mills somehow misjudged Kant with the former’s appropriation of the idea of sub-personhood as a trope for laying bare Kantian racism and its impact on his transcendental philosophy (Valls 2005).

Unfortunately, all the responses, however far back we go, to the problem moderns have been vitiated by something for which I suggest a recovery of an idea going back to Francis Bacon: idolatry. Although it would be too much to say that we are captive to “false notions,” I surely want to argue that our relation to the canons of the Euro-American philosophical tradition and, more specifically, our handling of the problem moderns and their tarnished legacy have fallen victim to one of the class of idols that Bacon long ago lamented had taken “possession of the human understanding and [had] taken deep root therein” (Bacon 1939: 34).

In *Novum Organum*, Bacon indicated that he parted ways with sceptics “who have denied that certainty could be attained at all” and asserted “simply that nothing can be known” even as he agreed with them that “not much can be known in nature by the way which is now in use” (Bacon 1939: 34). He instead wanted to identify the obstacles to genuine knowledge in nature and clear them as a prerequisite to attaining knowledge. He called these obstacles “idols.” He identified four such idols: “There are four classes of idols which beset men’s minds. To these for distinction’s sake I have assigned names,—calling the first class *Idols of the Tribe*; the second, *Idols of the Cave*; the third, *Idols of the Marketplace*; the fourth, *Idols of the Theater*” (Bacon 1939: 34). In ways similar to those identified by Bacon, our reaction to and, by extension, appreciation of the problem moderns are obscured by some contemporary analogues of the idols. I am suggesting that our philosophical understanding at the present time is afflicted with the equivalent of the “Idols of the Theater.”

I mentioned earlier that both Hume and Kant, in varying degrees of acknowledgment, responded to some of their contemporaries’ rejoinders to their arguments. But they did not do this with all or most of their contemporary interlocutors. Nor did others throughout the modern period make a habit of acknowledging, much less responding to those they consider unworthy interlocutors. I mention this because till now contributors to the discussions have been selective in their culling of what in the available literature they are willing to engage. Meanwhile, as the tradition was constructed and handed down to us, some unwritten criteria emerged regarding who was worthy of being read and responded to. In the last century, the professionalization and academicization of philosophy, the installation of a hierarchy of honorifics, and the star system have crystallized into the implantation of different forms of idolatry in our relationship to the canon.

I would like to suggest that the philosophy scene can be analogized to Bacon’s theater teeming with its own, resident idols. According to Bacon,

Lastly, there are idols which have immigrated into men’s minds from wrong laws of demonstration. These I call *Idols of the Theater*; because in my judgment all the received systems are but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion. Nor is it only of the systems now in vogue, or only of the ancient sects and philosophies, that I speak: for many more plays of the same kind may yet be composed and in like artificial manner set forth; seeing that errors the most widely different have nevertheless causes for the most part alike. Neither again do I mean this only of entire systems, but also of many principles and axioms in science, which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received.

(Bacon 1939: 35)

I do not fully describe here the analogy between philosophy and Bacon’s theater. One thing is clear, though. Philosophy, academic and professional, mimics a theater in several significant respects. The different systems, movements, trends, sects even in philosophy can be assimilated into “so many stage-plays” created by diverse thinkers all filling their plays with equally diverse “laws of demonstration” or, in the present case, modes of discourse and standards for assessing the quality of proficiency in them. Whether it is the analytic or the continental tradition, whether it is British empiricism

or French existentialism, phenomenology or positivism, each can be assimilated to different “received systems” “representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion.” And when Bacon spoke of “many more plays of the same kind” being “composed and . . . set forth,” we have contemporary versions in new systems like post-modernism, post-structuralism or postcolonial studies that have emerged with little different blinker regarding racism from those of the old “received systems.” Newer generations of actors are socialized into these systems and have thereby their respective idols, old and new, implanted in their minds. Errors, mischaracterizations, invalidities, and so on not only multiply, but each successive generation gives new leases on life to old crudities. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in how different generations in modern Euro-American philosophy have converged on how to treat the issue of the problem moderns.

I argue that the critiques of the racism of the philosophy canon have been vitiated by the idols of philosophy’s theater. It is why we keep talking endlessly about the racism but never seem to find a way to get beyond it to real changes that might begin to indicate fresh paths to reducing their impact on the very way we frame the problems that we find with them. Everyone possessed of the idols of philosophy’s theater takes her cue from the same tarnished canon respecting what should count as philosophy, who deserves to be read, whose arguments are worthy of rejoinders, and so forth. It is why it almost seems as if pedigree tops everything. And this, as I show in a moment, is as true for critics of the problem moderns as it is for their supporters. For us to see how this is so, how the idols prevent us from breaking free from the limits imposed by the many “systems now in vogue,” “the many axioms and principles which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received,” we need to introduce another category of moderns: *the excluded moderns*.

Excluded moderns are those real and putative victims of modernity who, simultaneously, embrace modernity and enact their “*J’accuse*” from very firm, immanent modern vantage points. Both the canon and those who continue to work with it have had a problem dealing with global African responses to the tarnished legacy of the Enlightenment. Just as the Enlightenment thinkers who populate the canon wrote as if no African before or contemporaneous with them had written on the perennial problems of philosophy or even on the issue that agitated the problem moderns, especially on the idea of freedom, many of us writing in our time, too, write as if it is forbidden that an African or a thinker of African descent might actually seek deliberately to embrace modernity and adopt its framework for making sense of the world. This is where the idolatry of the tradition comes into very clear relief. Everybody talks about the victims of philosophy’s racism. And defenders of the victims are very prominent in the discourse of modernity. But, and this is the problem, even we who are descended from the victims and continue to be victimized by modernity are dominated by philosophy’s idols.

Here is why. Let us recall what makes some moderns problematic. They deny that Africans and their descendants are unproblematic members of the human race. They insist that even if Africans are, they are of such an inferior character that their status as moral beings is easily trumped by the superior endowments of other groups. Most important, they contended that Africans did not possess Reason, a singular constituent of modern humanity, and if they did, it was of such poor quality that their kind had not contributed anything significant to human civilization. The moderns were quite consistent in their behavior. Primarily, they could not even be bothered to do due diligence



and provide evidence for these obviously empirical claims. When any evidence was adduced of African intelligence, they were quick to dismiss such, the most notorious being Hume's dismissal of a rumored Jamaican genius and Thomas Jefferson's cursory dismissal of Phyllis Wheatley's poetic gifts (Eze 1997: chapters 3 and 8; Popkin 1984). This partly explains all the hyperventilation about the effects on reason of nearness to the equator, living in the tropics, and suchlike that back then dominated the European discourse of philosophical anthropology. Be that as it may.

Are the victims of this philosophical libel as monolithic as the literature on philosophy and race seems to regard them? Are they the mute, inert, if not absent, presences that the literature would seem to think they were? We must answer both questions in the negative. Yes, Kant is welcome to think that black and stupid go together. The same goes for Hume. But what happens when we stop privileging Kant and Hume, stop trying to convince them that they are wrong on the basis of their logic alone? I would not like to be misunderstood. Indeed, were we to take seriously the illogicalities of the canon's thinkers on this score, we would long ago have done what, I point out later, should be done with them: show them as brilliant examples of how not to think about, much less make a case for inferiority, as did the late Richard H. Popkin (1984). I take it that a non sequitur does not become acceptable just in case it is advanced by Kant or Hume.

It is not in dispute that African-descended victims were never quiescent nor inert presences even as the tradition was being constituted. However isolated, there were living, breathing, writing refutations of the claims being made about black people.<sup>5</sup> Many of them not only criticized the insults that were bandied about respecting their race's intellectual abilities, they embraced modernity and sought to remake their lives—personal and public—as well as, in some cases, their societies in the modern style. This embrace was not without difficulties for them and these difficulties have probably shaped our own responses to them. I am talking of those African-descended thinkers who accepted that black people had fallen behind in the civilization race and embracing modernity and its tenets offered the quickest route to regaining their footing and making Africans walk again with other races in the march of civilization.<sup>6</sup>

No, they were no dopes. Nor were they self-haters. They definitely, resolutely and vociferously denied that African backwardness was either divinely ordained or secured by nature. There were others among them who never accepted that Africa was ever backward even if they accepted that Africa's progress had been arrested by Europe's regime of aggression and rapine against the continent.<sup>7</sup> Their standpoint was similar to that of Antonio Gramsci in his analysis of the backwardness of southern Italy or V.I. Lenin's of Russia respecting the slow development of capitalism there. Quite the contrary, those modern African thinkers were serious historicists, some of the earliest, even if inchoate, social constructionists for whom the backwardness and most other ills of their race, back then, were products of history and a history not separable from the incorporation of and long, active participation in, by Europeans, the heinous Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Many of them were the proto-"Afrocentrists" who were the first to claim ancient Egypt's African identity, and that not merely in a benign geographical sense; for whom Africa was not divisible into all the racist divisions that now rule our discourses: "Black Africa," "Africa proper," "sub-Saharan Africa," "Negro Africa," and so on (Horton 1969 [1868]; Attoh Ahuma 1971). They routinely assumed their place in the universe of thought prevalent in their time and while some of them had to deal with the racial

animosity contained in and fueled by the writings that now make up the modern canon by their fellow speakers of modernity-speak, they did not evince any signs that they thought that their philosophical explications came with an asterisk. In other words, they never considered their discourse to be external to the canon. They never thought that the modern self was a notion that was not capacious enough to accommodate their adaptations of it.

However, because the canonical thinkers did not think anything of their exertions, and, no doubt, we adhere strictly to their line of thinking, the idols of the theater ensure that we, too, think little of their efforts. This includes those of us, African-descended workers, in philosophy. It matters little how much we excoriate Hume, Kant, Hegel, and the rest of them; they remain our preferred interlocutors. We who are excluded are no less ardent adherents of the idols of academic philosophy's theater. Under the influence of this idolatry, we wittingly—and often unwittingly—participate in and help perpetuate the incestuous practices that permeate much of philosophy writing over the centuries, especially since the modern age came into its own. Notwithstanding all the vociferous declarations about objectivity and standards, the facts indicate that both the constitution of the canon and the orientation of those who subscribe to and work within its boundaries exhibit a high degree of tribal consciousness when it comes to what is to be read or taught; and who could feature as an interlocutor.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this idolatry and its concomitant in-group mentality, even though we consider problematic those who in their original postulations were living embodiments of contradictions, inconsistencies, and the occasional outright falsehoods, were selective in determining who were worthy interlocutors and what ought to be read, made a reputation based on myriad non sequiturs that we, their successors, have either continued to ignore or decided do not have to be refuted, we let them continue to rule the philosophical roost. This in spite of what we are told in elementary logic that pointing out a non sequitur is enough to dismiss the one who affirms it. Rather, it is those that they excluded but whose writings, we now know, rightly belong in the annals of their common discourse that we persistently ignore.

The problem is that the discourse of modernity cannot be neatly divided between the authors and their critics. The excluded moderns seem incongruous to us given the neat schema that we prefer to work with. This explains in part why we do not know what to do with the excluded moderns or how to incorporate them in our discourse and pedagogy. We hardly check into their writings unless the problem moderns and their worshippers deign to address such and, by so doing, indicate that such thinkers are “worthy” interlocutors. We expend more energy trying to reason with the problem moderns and, occasionally, unwittingly offering alibis for their glaring errors and distortions, if not their follies. But we never really breach the walls of the canon by that approach. What is more, under the impact of the idols of the theater, we, too, go along with the exclusions and limit our discussions, even our criticisms, accordingly to those that pass muster as “worthy” interlocutors. I reject this orientation.

It is time to bring the excluded moderns in from the cold. What happens when we take seriously the perorations of the excluded moderns and re-inscribe their contributions into the philosophical discourse of modernity and the records of modern Euro-American philosophy? Given that an important element of the inspiration for this collection is pedagogy, I would like to offer some suggestions on how teaching the canon might be problematized, maybe even improved, by looking from a different



vantage point. We have to invest in the excluded moderns and their offerings. Therein lies the path out of idolatry and to genuine knowledge, true portrayal and more correct appreciation of Euro-American philosophy's modern canon.

To begin with, we need to spread the news that the excluded moderns did what the problem moderns said they could not do: have and deploy subjectivity denominated by Reason. Kant was welcome to insist that blacks were sub-persons. But Kant could not stop blacks from proclaiming their personhood, flaunting it and insisting that folks like Kant show them respect. In light of this, although he would withhold recognition from black subjects, within the framework of modernity's own tenets, he would have had to make some serious investment in what Jean-Paul Sartre would in our time call "bad faith". Historically, under chattel slavery, the fact that black slaves were the only "farm implements" that could and did talk back must have occasioned considerable disquiet for their owners. What is more, slaves' insistence on their owners recognizing and respecting certain boundaries, insisting that they, too, deserved promise-keeping from their owners and, ultimately, exercising the prerogative of working for and purchasing their freedom might be a more effective reply to the denial or diminution of African humanity in the canon.

As I have written elsewhere, slaves may actually be better singers of freedom's song than their owners (Táiwò 2010a; James 1963). Those who confronted and often succumbed to the dread of death in order to be free are in reality better exemplars of Hegelian subjectivity that everyone associates with the master. When this is factored into the equation, the articulators of freedom who enjoyed leisure funded by the unpaid labor of African slaves cannot be the only law-making residents of freedom's domain. In a contest it cannot be that we continue to write as if the contest took place in the absence of the other party to the struggle. The color of the contest cannot be named after only one party to it. Historically and sociologically, that would be false. Should it be any less false in philosophy?

That is, our account of the canon's population as well as of who has participated in its constitution must remain essentially incomplete to the extent that we go along with the pretense that modern Euro-American philosophy has been solely constituted by thinkers who look a certain way. It is as if we accept that Euro-American philosophy has not had, among its interlocutors, thinkers who were not Caucasian. If we admit the responses to the fundamental claims of the canonical thinkers by those they described as less than human or inferior to themselves, I do not see how we can escape the judgment that modern Euro-American philosophy was hybrid, creolized, almost the whole time it has existed.

By way of illustration, let us assume that Jefferson was right to doubt that Ignatius Sancho wrote the letters that are attributed to his authorship (Eze 1997: 100).<sup>9</sup> Does that make it okay for us to appear to believe that Jefferson was right that Sancho did not author the letters and, if he was, given the quality of the writing "we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column" of his contemporaries? That is, should we conflate Jefferson's right to express an opinion and the correctness of the content of that opinion? What if, instead, we took seriously the ideas expressed by Sancho and juxtapose them with those of Jefferson respecting the issue of freedom and the wrongness of slavery?

Once they made the language of freedom their own, the slaves, the colonized, our excluded moderns, also set about fashioning the world after their own design. They laid hold of what is true and universal in the writings of the problem moderns and

domesticated it while, at the same time, apprehending the universal in their respective provinces (Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky 2001; Equiano 2004 [1789]). And the ability to name the world is a prerogative of rational humans. When slaves appropriated various social forms from their owners, they were no mimics; they *changed* the forms and created new idioms from the original syntaxes: new religious forms, new music genres, new cuisines, and so forth.

The same is true of the colonized when colonialism came on the heels of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Africans who accepted modernity wanted to marry the best of their indigenous inheritance with the best of their conflicted legacy from slavery and, later, colonialism. They regarded themselves as peoples who had previously exercised the privilege of leading the world in civilization; some even claimed traditions that made them first peoples in the world.

Why do we not insist, following the lead of black thinkers, that the Cartesian sum is not necessarily white and that when Hume proclaimed his generalization regarding the absence of genius among black people, he fell short of his inductive principles? (see Valls 2005: chapter 7). More importantly, all we need do is take very seriously the history of peoples in different parts of Africa and just simply dismiss, yes, dismiss Hume as an uninformed bigot rather than confer respectability on his rubbish by arguing with it as if there is some way, outside of prejudice, that it might be worthy of another look.

Our excluded moderns did a good job of showing up the hypocrisies, inconsistencies, falsehoods and illogicalities of the problem moderns. I am often stupefied by how often we ignore the yeoman efforts of excluded moderns to reduce the gap between the theory and the reality of modernity. Examples include W.E.B. Du Bois (Sundquist 1996), Paul Robeson (1998), Frantz Fanon (2008), and Aimé Césaire (1972) in our own time. What is even more remarkable is that the excluded moderns prove to be better moderns than their racist problem modern fellows. They were able to distinguish the truth kernel that problem moderns encased in the dross of racism and prejudice from the tribalism that distort their findings. This is why very few of them measure up to the standards of nationalism that global white supremacy evinced and would force on those of us who fight it. That is, they never argued that theirs was the “black” version of truth; they instead contested the claims of problem moderns to being purveyors of truth. They were trying to force their problem modern interlocutors to act as if the latter believed in the principles that were supposed to ground their common efforts in reaching true knowledge in nature.

I supply one example of the kind of entry that is missing. Horton was a shining example of an excluded modern who dismissed many of the favorite arguments that we repeatedly dress up as candidates for refutation, based on very firm modern grounds. He called Hume and his ilk out in 1868:

I must say a few words on some grave errors in generalization which men of science with restricted observation have arrived at respecting the capacity of progression in the African race. Thus it has been argued that their physical and mental peculiarities have undergone no change since they were first observed by civilized nations. “The type,” says Sir George Cornwall Lewis, “is as unchanged as that of the greyhound, since the time of the Romans.” Hume, in his *Essay on Natural Characters*, says that “There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion (negro), nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. . . . In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man

of parts and learning, but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.” A witty writer, the late Dr. Knox, of Edinburgh, believes that the races of men, particularly the negro, as they were several centuries ago, still continue to be now; and that despite of Christian influences and other civilizing agencies bearing on their rude and savage character, they will continue to be. Although there might be something suggestive and interesting in this antitheological scientific doctrine propounded in his *Fragment of the Races of Men*; yet still we deprecate in the strongest terms the main points of his arguments.

(Horton 1969 [1868]: 31)

The title of the chapter under review is “False Theories of Modern Anthropologists.” And it comes after an opening chapter titled “Description of the Original and Uncivilized State of the Native Tribes.” This is why I said above that the excluded moderns shared certain premises with problem moderns without at the same time buying into the latter’s pseudo-scientific and bigoted explanatory models. Where Horton saw the history as the place to look, the problem moderns tried to argue for a base in inalterable biology. Even when he bought into the erroneous views that climate mattered in the formation of racial groups, he never allowed that there were any fixed natures where humankind was concerned.

Now it must be acknowledged that the damaging influences to which the negro race has for centuries been subjected, have not been favourable to the improvement of their condition, nor in any way raising their minds to a higher species of cultivation; trampled under foot by perpetual despotism, enslaved from one generation to another, inhabiting the most wretched hovels that it is possible for humanity to exist in, deprived of every means of education or of witnessing the conquests of arts and science . . . can there be the least doubt in the minds of the unprejudiced that their present unimproved condition is the natural sequence of the operation of these powerful re-agents?

(Horton 1969 [1868]: 32)

If the conditions are contingent, they are open to alteration with the appropriate “re-agents,” Horton insists. His entire book is a manual of how to go about this regeneration after the “vindication of the race,” the other main aim of the text.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to this most scientific manner of proceeding Horton berated Dr. Knox for being fixated on race to an irrational extent.

True it is that certain peculiarities which are characteristic of a nation can be traceable for generations, however greatly admixture and other external influences may have operated on their general character; but to insist on the broad dogma that no changes have taken place in the races of men, or even animals, as far back as historical evidences can be traced, is to insist on what is opposed to nature; and none but the unreflecting can be carried away by so sweeping a doctrine. Dr. Knox regards everything to be subservient to race; and his arguments are brought forward to show that the negro race, in spite of all the exertions of Exeter Hall, or as his commentators most sneeringly call them, the

“broad-brimmed philanthropy and dismal science school,” will still continue as they were. To him, as he says, “Race is everything—literature, science, art—in a word, civilization depends on it. . . . With me race or hereditary is everything, it stamps the man.”

(Horton 1969 [1868]: 32)

Of another pseudo-scientist, Dr. Hunt, he wrote:

Of Dr. Hunt we must truly state that he knows nothing of the negro race, and his descriptions are borrowed from the writings of men who are particularly prejudiced against that race; his absurd pro-slavery views, as contained in his pamphlet, would perhaps have suited a century ago; but all true Africans must dismiss them with scorn.

(Horton 1969 [1868]: 33)

One is right to query why much of the debate on race and philosophy manages to proceed without taking seriously what those that I have called excluded moderns have said about the matter from the vantage point of their modern inheritance against those who subverted their shared principles to push odious but often groundless views. This is where the influence of the idols of the philosophy theater might help us make sense of these omissions.

I argue that once we rid ourselves of the idols of the philosophical theater, we immediately see that in offering their ideas to the public, problem moderns were in no position to control who reads them or how they are read. And insofar as African-descended readers could and were willing to pay the price of admission—acquire the relevant skills and resources to gain access to the materials—no one, not even the slave masters, could stop them from offering the world *their* takes on such materials and what frameworks they come to the contents of the canon with. It does not matter much that they have been largely ignored. But the battle had already been joined; the narrative could no longer pretend to any kind of racial purity. The works of the problem moderns can no longer be read innocently of how they have been received by African-descended interlocutors. To that extent, contrary to received wisdom modern philosophy has *always* been hybrid. Its hybridity is essential and inescapable. The exegeses, commentaries, criticisms, and other materials, including those authored by excluded moderns, become essential parts of the record. David Walker’s appeal is not incidental to Euro-American philosophy. Nor are Frederick Douglass’s reflections on freedom and bondage. They, and others, are an integral part of the record (Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky 2001). Horton’s contestations are not external to the tradition; they are integral to it. Their primary interlocutors are not local; they are the framers of the discourse, the ones who affirmed and denied freedom in the same breath; who spoke of but never meant human nature to be truly universal. In short, those who always cheated but hoped that some of their interlocutors, the excluded moderns—the idols already ensured that their fellow race-inflected thinkers would not see anything the matter with their illogicalities—would not notice. They were wrong about the excluded moderns. The only problem arises when we, in our time, fail to take into account the complexity and heterogeneity of that record.

When we take the record as it truly was constituted, we find that the color and composition of the canon begin to alter. This is nothing new. This is what happened when

feminists began to fill out the true record of the history of the Euro-American philosophical tradition going back to the ancients. Fortunately, we do not have to strain too much to show that the history of the same tradition has not been constituted by people who look only one way. The modern period is the most afflicted with racial prejudice (Park 2013).

In leaving this record unchallenged, we end up allowing global white supremacy to claim modernity as an exclusively European legacy and an ideological cudgel with which to clobber the Rest of Us into scampering to discover “alternative modernities” in our ever-shrinking localities. We, on the other hand, are content to dismiss modernity as a Eurocentric contraption and one our relationship with which is either as victims or resisters. One consequence of this idolatry is that we completely go along with the exclusion of non-European interlocutors in the discourse of modernity quite a number of whom were not mere mute objects—yes, there were some, especially those objectified by the European thinkers—but also, importantly, speakers of modernity’s language who, in some cases, adapted it to their own idioms. Indeed, a serious critical engagement with modernity cannot afford to ignore them. Unfortunately, so far, they have been twice excluded: first, by their European co-speakers of the language, and second, by us, the much-vaunted critics of modernity’s discourse. I hope that this piece indicates a useful direction for breaching the walls of modernity. The beginning of wisdom is the acknowledgment of the historicity of modernity and, as a consequence, its essential hybridity: many and diverse are the voices that have contributed to its constitution. Purity is not to be had, nor is it necessary.

For what I have just stated to be done, we must loosen the reins. We must tear down the walls that enclose and isolate the philosophical theater and extend our purview to those sources that our idolatry-driven penchant for pedigree has made us to discount in our attempts at filling out philosophy’s record. These include literature, slave narratives, protest pamphlets, theology, religious studies, and so on.

There is ample evidence that the problem moderns did not think that logic and conceptual analyses sufficed for their characterizations of African-descended peoples. They sought to find empirical corroboration for their logical expostulations and arguments. Their writings offered empirical details, facts, history, sociology, and so on, that they were convinced supported and provided much needed confirmation of their cases. This is no longer the case. We now live in a world in which, again, the idols dominate in this respect and they dictate that we come up with ever more sophisticated logic chopping to do a job that requires different sets of tools: fact-checking, alternative formulations, looser boundaries of the universe of discourse, and the products of the excluded moderns.

This, in the final analysis, is for me the only reason to continue to engage the perennial problem of the racism of the canons of the modern Euro-American philosophical tradition. One felicitous by-product of this approach will be the shutting down of the torrent of books and papers that seek to undermine racism mainly, if not solely, by philosophical analysis.

## Notes

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- \* I would like to thank Barry Hallen and Grant Farred for crucial interventions in the process of revising the original version of this chapter. This is a better product thanks to their suggestions.
  - 1 Pseudo-science here refers to efforts devoted to showing that African-descended and other peoples designated black in our common discourse are congenitally defective in their mental capacities and,

- therefore, are inferior to white people. An appreciable segment of this is to be found in the discourse regarding intelligence quotients (IQ) of different peoples. The pseudo-science of eugenics was foregrounded by the anthropology and biology of the nineteenth century that sought to confirm on respectable scientific grounds what philosophy had given birth to in the eighteenth century. For a more recent treatment of this theme by an African scholar, see Bernard M. Magubane (2007).
- 2 No doubt there are many ways to understand my colleague's reaction. We may be wrong to assume that the student's question or suggestion did not blindside the teacher. That the teacher did not think that there is a connection does not immediately translate into racism. For the rest, the validity of Locke's arguments is not obviously impacted by his personal behavior. This is what separates modern philosophy's standpoint from that of the ancients regarding the dialectics of knowing and doing. But that is beyond the scope of the present discussion.
  - 3 When I was taught Locke in Nigeria, no less—admittedly back then by Europeans, but nothing has changed since Africans started doing the duty—at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, Locke's participation in the slave trade or the appropriation of native lands was never mentioned. At a conference in 2010 in Accra, Ghana, a young Nigerian philosopher was indignant at my extending the status of philosophers to Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sédar Senghor, and Julius Nyerere. He said, "When I think of philosophers, I think of Hume, Kant, and Hegel." He was trained at the doctoral level in Nigeria almost 30 years after my time.
  - 4 See p. 19, for an example of an African thinker making the same judgment of some of what European thinkers were offering in the nineteenth century.
  - 5 Olaudah Equiano lived from 1745 to 1797 while Jefferson lived from 1743 to 1826. They were practically contemporaries and they were writing at the same time, even though one had a totally inauspicious start to his intellectual career and was never as privileged as the other in terms of enabling circumstances for his career, such as it was. Most importantly, one was a slave who bought his freedom and the other was a slave owner. It is curious that neither Eze nor Magubane thought it fit to include any excerpts from Equiano's or any other African thinker's writings in their respective works. There is no reason to speculate on why this choice was made, but I suggest that, unless we decide that Equiano could not have been a philosopher or that his refutations of the racism of the likes of Jefferson do not pass muster as philosophy, the ideas belong together and readers of the canon will be better served by knowing that thinkers of African descent did not wait till their location in Euro-American academies in the twentieth century to challenge the inconsistencies and crudities of the Euro-American philosophical canon. Similar things can be affirmed of Ignatius Sancho, who lived and wrote from 1720 to 1789. Apparently, from the existing literature, Popkin's (1984) point on this same score has not gained much traction with subsequent commentators.
  - 6 On the American side, such was their acceptance of and adherence to modernity as the template for reordering their world that many African American thinkers of the nineteenth century have been lumped together with the ranks of Western imperialists in Africa. See Tunde Adeleke (1998). In West Africa, their ranks included Philip Quaake, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, James Africanus Beale Horton, and S.R.B. Attah Ahuma. For a discussion of these "apostles of modernity," see Olúfemi Táíwò (2010b).
  - 7 A very good example is William Essuman Gwira Sekyi, also known as Kobina Sekyi. In the early part of the twentieth century, he was a member of the Aristotelian Society in the United Kingdom.
  - 8 I am often amused by how much even the new movements incarnate these idols in their new systems when it comes to who they think deserves to be admitted into their discourses. As a colleague loves to ask: were there no intellectuals of African descent in France, or why is there no hint of them in the latest mode of French philosophizing that has crossed the pond to the United States?
  - 9 Contrast this with the indictment of slavery and its operations in Equiano (2004 [1789]). It is doubtful that he was ever interested in evidence. Hume's example is instructive in this respect. According to Popkin (1984), "Hume did not look into the facts in the case. He managed to avoid taking cognizance of the facts that disproved his claim, even though he knew of at least some of them" (p. 66).
  - 10 Horton had more positive things to say about some indigenous cultures in West Africa regarding their preparedness for modern governance based on the advanced nature of their indigenous modes of governance. See Part II: "African Nationality" in the book for some significant insights that bear relevance even now.



## Further Reading

Howard Brotz, ed. *African-American Social and Political Thought* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999) is a very good collection of original materials from African American excluded moderns. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993) makes the argument that one cannot read American literature as represented in its canons without acknowledging how the literature is inseparable from the African American experience that helped to define it, with which it has been in conversation from the very beginning, and one which remains the foil against which white imagination has pretended to define the universal. I have made essentially the same argument for the formation of the modern canon in Euro-American philosophy. J. Ayodele Langley, ed. *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa: 1856–1970* (London: Rex Collings, 1979) has an introduction by the editor that situates the materials in it in the annals of modernity from the African-descended contributors to modern thought.

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