What's in a Name? African Philosophy in the Making

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The last several years have brought a sea-change in the reception of African thought in Western departments of philosophy. This is not to suggest naively that institutional changes have occurred across the West allowing for African philosophy to be practiced as another tradition alongside analytic, continental, and American philosophies. Nevertheless, only ten years ago there was no hospitality provided by Western philosophers to African philosophy; the very term was controversial since it had long been taken as a brute fact, stated explicitly long ago by Kant and Hegel, that Africans did not and could not have a philosophy. Indeed, the relationship between Western philosophy and African philosophy was one way: African philosophers often borrowed from the traditions of the West; the reverse was never the case. The only African philosophers read in the West were those trained in the main lines of Western philosophy and were known, if at all, for their contributions to those lines of inquiry, such as metaphysics and epistemology. In other words, Africans were taken to be raw materials for inculcation into Western modes of thinking, following the scheme of earlier forms of military colonialism.

One would be wrong to think that the relationship has been far different between African philosophy and the theories of race and the post-colonial. Despite all the talk by the latter two of engaging the Other, the relation between these fields and African philosophy has also been predominantly one-way: African philosophers took up these fields of inquiry to enlighten their own work. The references to their work, however, by those working in race and post-colonial studies, have been few and far between. (Notably, there have a few African philosophers who have been known through their work on theories of race and/or post-coloniality, i.e. K.A. Appiah and Lucius Outlaw, but their work on African philosophy has been less read than one would have thought.) In any case, it is interesting that African philosophy has been confused by many in the academic community as but a synonym for critical race theory. Certainly, the questions of race and colonialism are
not far from the minds of those working in African philosophy. However, this does not mean that these fields of inquiry are conflatable with the rich traditions of African philosophy. The difference between them, I would argue, would be one of “history”—the history of philosophies created and continued on the continent before race became the dominant trope of Western colonialism beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries. To confuse African philosophy with critical race theory—itself an invaluable enterprise—is an intellectually colonizing maneuver since it suggests that such a philosophy could only exist as an answer (via critique) to Western conceptions of race.

Thus to consider African philosophy as such it is necessary to consider its history, and thus its making as a conceptual field. If the days have passed when African philosophers were forced into a posture in which they were constantly on the defensive against those that questioned that there even exists African philosophy, the day may finally have arrived when a history of African philosophy can be provided, one focused on a rich series of traditions beyond recent trends occurring after the break-up of the overt colonialism in the 1950s and 60s. In the past several years, this history has become more and more available to philosophers and lay thinkers alike, either in the form of an anthology or academic treatise.

But what does a “history” of African philosophy look like? Recent books on the subject—from Barry Hallen’s _A Short History of African Philosophy_ (2002) to Richard Bell’s _Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues_ (2002)—have had to face, whether explicitly or not, the fact that African philosophy can only glance at its traditions through a mirror violently fractured during the colonial period. The discontinuity marked by the colonization between the pre- and post-colonial periods is not just theoretical, i.e. all histories are discontinuous until a narrative is forced upon contingent events from the outside. Rather, the imposition of colonial governance, the forced conversions and intellectual enslavement of a number of African peoples, cut many on the African continent away from their traditions. As such, one who approaches a history of African philosophy needs to take seriously the question of tradition on the African continent, and when this tradition is said to begin. Does the tradition of African philosophy date to 3000 BCE in the Nile River Valley, as the beginning chapter of Barry Hallen’s recent _A Short History of African Philosophy_ suggests? If so, what is the connection between, say, the moral teachings of Ptah-hotep and thinking currently done on the African continent? If there is no connection at all, then in what way is it a tradition said to date prior to the 20th century? Barry Hallen is right to suggest that the “historical perspective” is important given the need by contemporary African philosophers to combat the colonialists’ view that Africans were not philosophical until the imposition of Western values and techniques during the colonial period (SH, 11). But this leads us to the paradox that this tradition is mapped out from the present in order to combat a wrong-headed view that Africans can only now, after colonialism, begin to philosophize. Lucius Outlaw has pointed to this paradox in his description of African philosophy as “(re)constructive,” that is, African philosophy attempts to “recount (i.e. to construct) a (as opposed to the) history of (African) philosophy.”
Does this lend credence to Hegel’s view in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* that Africa is outside history, that because of the lack of rationality on the part of Africans, it could not (then) take part in the march of philosophical reason? Outlaw rightly argues that this is not the case, that each philosophy has its own ethnographic or reconstructive moments, for example in Martin Heidegger’s (re)construction of the Greek tradition in his deconstruction of so-called onto-theology. We see this most clearly at the conclusion of Hallen’s chapter in *A Short History of African Philosophy* on pre-20th century African philosophy. Hallen argues that “the documented reflections of individuals such as Ptah-hotep, Zar’a Ya’aqob, and Anton Wilhelm Amo are impossible to deny or to ignore. And the heritage they ... have bequeathed to their continent and the world deserves the recognition it for so long has been denied” (12). The contemporary reclamation of these important figures, blotted out from our historical gaze for far too long, is important to the current project of building this tradition; there is no heritage without this (re)constructive moment. As Hallen puts it while reviewing the work of Congolese philosopher Okonda Okolo, tradition “involve[s] a sense of transmission and reception, but in a context where the meanings of any particular tradition are constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted—and therefore always changing—by different individuals and in different historical contexts over the passage of time” (*SH*, 63). In other words, the reclamation of an African tradition by African philosophers is not, as Tsenay Serequerberhan puts it, an “antiquarian quest”: “properly speaking, it is a re-claiming of historicity, of human existence, in the context of Africa.”

Emmanuel Eze points to the *contemporary* importance of this reclamation of history:

> The idea of “African philosophy” as a field of inquiry thus has its *contemporary roots* in the effort of African thinkers to combat political and economic exploitation, and to examine, question, and contest identities imposed upon them by Europeans. The claims and counter-claims, justifications and alienations that characterize such historical and conceptual protests and contestations indelibly mark the discipline of African philosophy.5

Segun Gbadegesin agrees, but goes further in arguing that perhaps more than anywhere, African philosophy has its *raison d’être* only as long as it keeps an eye on the the “contemporary African experience”:

Contemporary philosophers can learn a lot by probing into the philosophical foundations of traditional thought and the philosophical issues in the view of traditional philosophers, some of whom can still be identified. However, all of these must be done with a view to throwing light on the resolution of contemporary problems.... [M]ore than anywhere else, contemporary Africa requires the nurturing of a philosophical preoccupation that is relevant to the condition of life in Africa. (*TYP*, 22)
There is a double origin at the heart of the discussions of African philosophy: the traditions reclaimed through the ethnographic work of anthropologists and philosophers, as well as the very act of reclamation as it occurs during the 20th and 21st centuries to combat the racist assumptions of Africa's colonizers and, as Gbadegesin puts it, “raise issues crucial to the resolution of the present crisis” in Africa.

The title of this essay, as such, points to the double bind of African Philosophy, a label grafting together two very different proper names, “Africa” and “Philosophy,” both encumbered with troubling histories. On the one hand, as V. Y. Mudimbe put it, the signifier “Africa” has been long used to “justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent and naming its ‘primitives’ or ‘disorder’ ... as the subsequent means of its exploitation.” On the other hand, “philosophy” as a term has been used to dignify and privilege certain systems of thought (i.e. European) over the so-called mystical or religious thought of non-Western peoples. As such, African philosophy, Eze notes, is a “field of inquiry” of “claims and counter-claims” that by its very existence contests the colonialist assumptions of Europe: Africans were/are incapable of philosophical thought.

Given this history, what, then, is African philosophy? The question hints at the double temporality that we take to be important in any discussion of African philosophy. The “then” points us to both the past and future: What happened then in African philosophy? What will be its future, then? The “is” reminds us that these questions always pose themselves between past and future in the contestations of the present. As such, one can also argue that the “roots” of African philosophy is always “contemporary,” but only in such a way that it is understood that the contemporary is fully historical while at the same time presenting us with the possibilities of a future beyond that which history has lied out for us. The field of inquiry of African philosophy is never simply marked out and decided for all time; it is not the homogeneous space of an identity. Rather, if African philosophy is going to contest the traditional boundaries of its given colonial identity, as Lucius Outlaw argues, then it must not only counter the content of Africa’s identity as the dark other of Europe. It must also deconstruct the essentializing force of any simple identity, from the racist portraits of the colonial period to the Négritude philosophy of Léopold Senghor. Building on Outlaw’s assertion that African philosophy is deconstructive/reconstructive, we will argue that African philosophy takes place in a dynamic in-between space in the always “contemporary” interstices dividing past and future.

This temporal dynamic is implicit at the heart of recent debates between the universalist and particularist camps in African philosophy. To put this debate simply, the universalists, such as Paulin Hountondji, claim that philosophy is at its best when it follows the technical dictates of a “doctrine that values intellectual responsibility and demands that each affirmation be sustained by a proof or a rational justification”; philosophy, in this view, is a universal system of argumentation whose potency is unaffected by cultural or historical circumstances. The particularists, on the other hand, believe that all philosophy is historically and culturally mediated. “Rational justification,” for the particularists, is but a code for one mode of phi-
losophizing among others, albeit a privileged one within the Western analytic tradition. As Tsenay Serequeberhan notes in the particularist vein, “philosophy is this critical and explorative engagement of one’s own cultural specificity and lived historicalness.”

To put the distinction between the universalists and particularists another way, the universalists, Jay Van Hook argues,

see philosophy as singular; and they are especially concerned that what is called African philosophy is genuine philosophy. Particularists see philosophy as diverse and plural, as taking shapes in different cultures. They are primarily concerned that what goes under the name of African philosophy is genuinely African.

This paper will attempt to read between these two positions, which we will argue can only be thought in contradistinction to each other. We will argue that African philosophy, however defined by Gyekye, Tempels, et al., is part of what Homi Bhabha calls the “emergence of the interstices” in the “hybrid” forms of post-colonial cultures. Or, as Eze puts it with regard to modern African political practices, but which we can apply to African philosophy,

political practices in Africa today are a more flexible and often highly eclectic and syncretic mélange of the African and the Western, the old and the new, the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, and so forth. (PAC, 314)

Re-thought in these terms, African philosophical practice cannot be reduced to that which at worst is an a-historical (universalist) or relativist (particularist) enterprise, as a number of commentators, including Carole Pearce, are want to do. On the contrary, we will argue that by operating between these positions, as a syncretic but never stable mélange, “African philosophy” is a performative signifier that by its very name brings together and calls into question an endless number of oppositions: past/future, universalist/particularist, African thought/philosophy, etc. To borrow a phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy, “African philosophy” as “singular-plural” becomes a practice beyond the problematic essentialist and/or colonialist assumptions underlying the most simplistic versions of the particularist and universalist positions. A singular-plural “African philosophy,” as Lucius Outlaw argues, names the “reconstructive” space of an African philosophy necessarily “constituted by diversity.”

In order to clarify some of the assertions above, we will first review Henry Odera Oruka’s famous “four trends” of African philosophy—later amended to six—in order to articulate the growing multiplicity of work within the project of African philosophy. In the latter part of this essay, we will return to questions regarding the two axes through which African philosophy operates: particularism and universalism on the one hand, and past and future on the other. We will read these questions alongside Lucius Outlaw and his essay on the “Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges” of African philosophy.
I.

In his seminal essay, "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy," Oruka divides African philosophy into four trends: (1) ethno-philosophy, (2) philosophic sagacity, (3) nationalist ideology, and (4) professional philosophy.¹² For our purposes, it is important to note that Oruka’s four-fold classification has long worked as a template by a number of other leading African philosophers in thinking about the discipline, even if they find plenty of room for disagreement with this schema.

For Oruka, the first trend is ethno-philosophy, exemplified by the early work of Placide Tempels on the ontological philosophy of the Bantu, perhaps the first work by a Western scholar to use the term “philosophy” with regard to the thoughts of an African people. The ethnographic trend has grown to be a considerable proportion of African philosophy. Ethnographers, be they anthropologists, sociologists, or philosophers, attempt to directly counter the view that, in Lancelin Keita words, there has been “no genuine African intellectual matrix which could serve as a basis for African scholarship.”¹⁴ For Kwame Gyekye, the “lack of writing in Africa's historical past ... has been responsible for the assumption that there is no such thing as African philosophy.”¹⁵ Despite a supposed lack in Africa of written philosophical “classics,” Gyekye argues that one should not conflate a lack of writing with a dearth of rigorous philosophical thoughts on the part of pre-colonial Africans. Implicitly comparing the role of the ethnographer to the work of Plato in writing down and passing on the philosophy of Socrates, Gyekye argues that ethno-philosophers, in addition to acting as midwives to the tradition by reproducing unwritten philosophical texts in the present day, also unearth “traditional” philosophies behind the thought and actions of every people ... it is also expressed or reflected in real and vital attitudes. In Africa, a great deal of philosophical material is imbedded in the proverbs, myths, and folk-tales, folk-songs, rituals, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the peoples (ACP, 200).

For the ethno-philosopher, philosophy is latent within the everyday actions of a people; philosophy, as such, is also the worldviews that guide and maintain a culture. In addition, by reproducing both the latent and explicit philosophical doctrines of the African peoples, ethno-philosophers hope to provide future African philosophers with an “intellectual matrix” indigenous to the continent itself.

Ethno-philosophy has long been under attack from a number of quarters. The term itself, as Outlaw notes, has come to be a pejorative in certain philosophical circles.¹⁶ Paulin Hountondji argues that ethno-philosophy is ultimately not “African” because it is addressed to Western audiences, either by confirming the stereotypes of African thought as pseudo-philosophy or pre-scientific, or in trying to counters claims that African doesn’t have an indigenous philosophy. In either case, Hountondji argues that the folk-wisdom gathered by the ethnographers cannot match the rigor and scientficity of contemporary philosophy. P.O. Bodunrin,
for his part, argues that ethno-philosophy presents a false picture of the “tradition” as bereft of the strife and problems that plague all societies. In addition, Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo, contra Oruka’s four trends, argue that ethno-philosophy is to be considered neither “African” nor “philosophy.” For Karp and Masolo, “the history of African philosophy is a history of two contesting parties,” the first of which “has come to be known as ethno-philosophy.” By way of declaring victory, Karp and Masolo write that the second, “now known as African philosophy, argues that philosophical practice, as a second-order critical evaluation of first-order thinking about nature, culture, and experience, must be a vital activity in Africa.” Following Paulin Hounondji, whose *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* can be read as an early hymn to the assumed victory of “African philosophy” over ethno-philosophy, Karp and Masolo argue that the

most notable characteristic of the ethno-philosophy school is its characterization of philosophy as a form of narrative [and as] an innate form of indigenous expression. It could only be “recovered” and revalorized into a *hybridized postcolonial present*. The crucial point we are making is that the ethno-philosophers’ ambiguous position indicates that they lack a location or identity in either the “tradition” or the colonial worlds (*CI*, 6-7, emphasis added).

While certainly “back to the source” philosophers would argue with this assertion, we concur with Karp and Masolo that ethno-philosophy can only be (re)constructed in the “hybridized postcolonial present,” although we don’t agree with Karp, Masolo, and Bodunrin that ethno-philosophy is ultimately a form of nostalgia. In fact, we see the strength of its thought in its lack of “identity in either the ‘tradition’ or the colonial worlds.” However, this is less an ambiguity, defined by Walter Benjamin as simple confusion, than a structural necessity brought on by the reconstruction of the source, a repetition that can never be the same as the original.

Oruka’s second trend of African philosophy, philosophic sagacity, appears at first glance to tread the same ground as ethnography. For Oruka, whose research on Kenyan wisemen and wisewomen has been instrumental in this trend, sage philosophy is the expressed “thoughts of wisemen and women in *any given community* and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom and didactic wisdom.” Oruka argues “one way of looking for the traces of African philosophy is to wear the uniform of anthropological field work and use dialogical techniques to pass through the anthropological fogs [of ethnographic work] to the philosophical ground” (*SP*, xxi). Oruka distinguishes the thoughts of the sages from the particularist worldviews of ethnographic works by supporting two claims. First, sages do not simply transmit the prevailing opinions of their communities; they “make a critical assessment of what the people take for granted” (*SP*, 28). For Oruka, the “master of popular wisdom” is merely a folksage as compared to the philosophic sage, who is an “expert in didactic wisdom.” Secondly, Oruka argues that it is not the case that “philosophy in the sense of strict
logical argument and rationative thinking is Greek but not African.” Three criticisms of Oruka’s sage philosophy are worth mentioning:

(1) Bodunrin notes that it is impossible to separate the source of the “philosophy” available in Oruka’s field reports. Oruka obtained the views of the sages by interviewing them and writing down their answers; the texts of the sages are produced out of a dialogue and under questioning with the “trained philosopher.” Whose views are we truly getting? Despite his sympathy for Oruka’s work and his attempts to find philosophical rigor in the teachings of the sages, Bodunrin ultimately argues that both ethno-philosophy and philosophic sagacity come perilously close to being non-philosophy since they often rely on the worldviews of everyday people. British philosophy, he argues, “does not mean the philosophy of the average Englishman, nor a philosophy generally known among the British people” (QAP, 27). Bodunrin argues that Oruka seems to be “helping to give birth to philosophical ideas already in [the sages], rather than simply recording their statements” (9). Although Bodunrin derides those who would say “this is not how we approach our study of Western philosophy,” he warns that if philosophers recording the thoughts of the sages were “merely interested in how and what Africans think about persons [then] their work would not be philosophically interesting, not anymore interesting than the ethnographers” (29; 9). In other words, for Bodunrin, the job of the philosopher and the sages, as philosophers, is to enter into a critical dialogue regarding community beliefs. Wiredu makes a similar claim with regard to “African traditional philosophy”: “A reference to British philosophy is unlikely to be interpreted as alluding to the communal Weltanschauung of say, British rural communities. Indeed, even when one speaks of traditional British philosophy this will be taken not in an anthropological sense, but to refer to the line of British empiricists stemming from Bacon.” Wiredu goes on to claim that the fact that African philosophy is thought in these anthropological terms bespeaks the continued “traditionalism” of the African peoples. If Africa is itself to modernize, Wiredu argues, it must also modernize its intellectual and philosophical tools.

(2) Oruka’s definition of a sage was based on an ideal construction. He chose sages not only on the basis of their supposed wisdom within a community, but also in the amount of geographic and intellectual space separating them from the metropolises. As such, Oruka chose sages that were both rural and illiterate in European languages in order that they were deemed closer to the “traditional” African ways of life (see, for example, SP, 71). But this method for choosing sages is problematic because it assumes the traditional/modern distinction underlying colonialist ideologies, which took Africans to be too primitive and non-modern to be left to their own devices. In addition, even if we accept the dubious assumption that the sources of African thought are to be found in the rural communities—an assumption of many ethnographers as well—it is still doubtful that even these “traditional” philosophies developed in complete isolation from the beliefs and customs of the city.

(3) A last point, connected to the second, is that it is striking that Oruka’s work on African sages was limited to the Kenyan rural areas, given that he argues that men and women in “any given community,” presumably in the Africa’s cities
as well, can express sage philosophy. Again, we see this as a problematic return to a definition of the true African as rural and steeped in an already pre-conceived “tradition.” However, as Outlaw points out, what is often thought to be a limitation of ethnographical and sage field research—that this “philosophy” is hopelessly mediated through the guise of the philosophical researcher—is its redeeming feature. As Outlaw asks, “is it proper to deny of these people the recognition that they were participants in activities we now call ‘philosophy?’” (RP, n. 41, 213). The “philosophy” is less to be found in the “source,” which is not to say that the research is any less important, than in the very act of “(re)construction” between the philosopher and his or her sources:

Any attempt to recount (i.e. to construct) a (as opposed to the) history of philosophy will be to reconstruct a history of philosophy as practiced by particular individuals who are part of particular cultural life-worlds. Such a recounting will necessarily include (or presuppose) an “ethnological” moment ... Furthermore, this recounting will be governed by what we (i.e. the person[s] doing the reconstructing) take the word “philosophy” to mean (RP, n.41, 213-4).

A philosophical movement that attempts to give context to the “we”
23 discussed by Outlaw is the third trend of African philosophy identified by Oruka: the nationalist ideologies produced most notably by Africa’s first post-colonial leaders, including Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, and Kwame Nkrumah. Generally speaking, these leaders sought not only to decolonize the nations they led, but also their countries’ minds. With influences ranging from Existentialism to Marxism, these writers/statesmen are often accused of importing Western ideas into African philosophical practices, despite explicitly arguing for a “violent affirmation” of Pan-Africanism.24 For example, the writers of the Negritude movement—and this is to simplify—often articulated an essential difference between black Africans and white Europeans. While Senghor argues that European whites “first distinguish” themselves “from the object ... immobilizing it outside of time and in some sense outside space,”25 Black Africans,

by their very physiological makeup (which should not, however, make us lose sight of their psychic heredity and social experience), their behavior is more lived, in the sense that is a more direct, a more concrete expression of sensation and stimulation ... thus the Negro tracks more faithfully to stimulation by the object: he espouse its rhythm” (ON, 119).

This argument reminds many of a return to the racialism practiced by whites during the colonial period and described succinctly by K. Anthony Appiah as “committed not just to the view that there are heritable characteristics which constitute a sort of racial essence, but also in the claim that the essential heritable character-
istics account for more than the visible morphology,” e.g., when Senghor noted that “l’émotion est nègre comme la raison est hellène.”27 In addition, one could also note with unease the similarity between Senghor’s claim that black Africans “have the sensitivity of women” and the racisms of the 19th century (ON, 117). As Nancy Leys Stepan has noted, the racist “sciences” of the 19th century often remarked upon the similarities between sexual and racial traits: “women, it was observed, shared with Negroes a narrow, child-like, and delicate skull, so different from the more robust and rounded heads characteristic of males of ‘superior’ races.... In short lower races represented the ‘female’ type of the human species, and females the ‘lower race’ of gender.”28

While Negritude writers were on the vanguard, literally, of battling the European colonialists politically, a number of Negritude writers, philosophically, repeated the dubious colonialist assertion that racial differences are part of a human reality arising from an a-historical inner state. This is not to say that the Negritude writers, including Senghor, were not aware of the historical dimension of the ontologizing of race. Nevertheless, Senghor in particular argues that there is an essential component of the physiological make-up of black Africans that transcends geographic boundaries, as when he comments that, despite vast differences in culture and geography from that of black Africans, American blacks were still more in touch with the rhythms of nature than their white counterparts. However, as critique, Senghor’s writing brought into relief the fact that the Western predilection for oppositions, especially that between subject/object, was part of the colonialist urge to treat Africans as “thingified” non-humans. The harshest words for Senghor’s view have come from philosophers that have been just as critical of the colonial regimes, in all of its guises, but worry about the repetition of Western categories in nationalist ideologies. Franz Fanon argued that it is “the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates Negritude.”29 Negritude, for Fanon, was a “florid writing which on the whole serves to reassure the occupying power,” because it simply inverted, but kept in place, the language of the colonialist regimes. However, as Ran Greenstein points out, Negritude writers believed that it was a shared pre-colonial past and/or common physiological make-up, not they, that created Negritude. Nevertheless, Greenstein argues that such a common “source” for African-ness is at best a result of contemporary struggles:

No pre-colonial discourses of Africa [i.e. “Africa” as a pre-conceived whole] are known and it is highly doubtful that indigenous conceptualizations of Africa as a whole (as opposed to specific groups and regions within it) ever existed. Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and Black Consciousness have all emerged in the aftermath of the colonial encounter, and not just in their written forms, although they have drawn on and sought to mobilize pre-colonial discourse.30

It is in this vein that Bodunrin argues that the nationalists’ romanticization of traditional African communities as communal and relatively peaceful is belied by
“the interminable land disputes between communities, sometimes within the same village” (QAP, 7). African communalism was sustained, he argues, by “a feeling of closeness among those who claim a common ancestry,” i.e. proximate family structures, that are unworkable in light of the heterogeneous and increasingly urbanized populations that now constitute the African political space; things are always more complicated than the colonialist either/or (either white/reasoning/masculine/urban or black/emotion/feminine/rural). In addition, for Bodunrin, the first trend of ethno-philosophy31 was taken up the nationalist-ideological movements to glorify an African past in order to forecast an almost utopian non-colonial future. But, as with the other three trends, Bodunrin argues “what is needed” in the work of the nationalists “is more rigor and systemization” (QAP, 8).

This rigor, Bodunrin believes, has and continues to be provided by the fourth trend of African philosophy identified by Oruka, namely that of “professional philosophy.” Bodunrin, following Oruka, describes the trend as the work of many trained philosophers. Many of them [including Bodunrin and Oruka] reject the assumptions of ethno-philosophy and take a universalist point of view. Philosophy, many of them argue, must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation in the society within which the philosophers operate. According to this school, African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics, or history of philosophy (QAP, 2).

This trend in African philosophy, then, is often identified with the Western analytic tradition. In addition, those working from within this trend often explicitly define themselves in opposition to ethno-philosophy. For his part, Wiredu is impatient with the inclusion of the three other trends as part of contemporary African philosophy. “The post-colonial era in African philosophy,” he writes, “is the era of professionalism.”32

For heuristic purposes, we might map the universalist/particularist distinction onto Oruka’s four trends, identifying the particularism with the first trend, with each growing more universal by the fourth. Universalists, such as Hountondji, Wiredu, and Bodunrin (who have self-consciously, though ironically, referred to themselves as the Vienna circle of African philosophy [SP, xxiv]), would take part in the fourth trend, in direct opposition to the particularists of the ethno-philosophers such as Keita, Mbiti, and Gyekye. However, this taxonomy quickly withers, given that a number of ethnographers use their research to show that Africans, too, take part in a universal philosophy. If this juxtaposition of trends does not work, it is also the case that the separate trends that Oruka identifies often become a “syncretic mélange” from which African philosophers work. For example, even the strongest proponents of universalism operate between the four trends, from ethnophilosophy to professionalism. Wiredu, to name one, offers rich work on the Akan
language and political structures. While recognizing the increasing importance of language in the act of philosophizing, Wiredu has written about the importance of the “African philosopher ... thinking things in his language as well as in foreign ones” as a means of avoiding the dangers of “mental colonization” (CUP, 153-4). In addition, Hountondji has increasingly been more receptive to the “important theoretical development within anthropology and African studies” as part of “Africa’s urgent need for self-discovery” (MR, xviii-xix). And, of course, Oruka has identified himself as working with the two trends of professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity. This Vienna Circle of Africa, then, often appears less interested in logic and epistemology per se than in putting forth a truly African philosophy.

In addition, even as the so-called four trends have not held fast (and one could argue that they were never meant to do so); other taxonomies of African philosophy—universalist vs. particularist, folk philosophy vs. professional philosophy, Keita’s three-fold history of African philosophy, etc.—have been undercut by arguments made by Hountondji and Wiredu, respectively, that “our [African] philosophy is yet to come” and “it is still in the making” (MR, 53; PAC, 36). If one takes seriously these claims, then any taxonomy of African philosophy will be hopelessly provisional and incomplete. Indeed, even Oruka had, prior to his 1995 death, expanded the number of trends in African philosophy to include the so-called hermeneutic work of Wiredu and Gyekeye (although we would also want to include the texts of Tsenay Serequeberhan and V.Y. Mudimbe), and the “narrative” and “literary” trend represented by Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiongo. One can, of course, question the ideological suppositions of this schema—why don’t the profoundly philosophical texts of Serequeberhan and Soyinka, for example, warrant inclusion in the trend of “professional” philosophy?—but it is undeniable that the proliferation of such “maps” of African philosophy, from Wiredu to Keita, point to the multiplicity of work being done under the singular-plural heading of “African philosophy.”

II.

There have been a number of responses by African philosophers with regard to the singular-plural of African philosophy. The first move, which we have discussed, is to privilege one trend, be it Egyptian thought (Keita) or “professional philosophy” (Karp and Masolo), as the true “African philosophy” at the expense of the other trends. The second move has been to seek a “synthesis” transcending the universal/particular, ethnographic/philosophic, sagacity/national-ideologist/professional trends and to identify African philosophy as that which brings these particular philosophical strategies together. Such a synthesis often has its own philosophical motive and must elide the irresolvable aspects of these philosophical positions. After all, it often seems that there are as many definitions for “African” and “philosophy” as there are thinkers who have weighed in on the issue. How can we reconcile these texts into a single system if these thinkers cannot even agree on what constitutes philosophy? How are we to synthesize the claims of Appiah and Wiredu that philosophy arises from the (preferably written) competition of ideas
with the sage philosophy described by Oruka (the sages, almost by definition, have only the community values, and not other individuals, with which to confront their [often unwritten] ideas)? How can we reconcile Bodunrin’s call for critique with the narratives provided by ethno-philosophy? A synthesis of these philosophical positions would be but another position that, at best, picks and chooses from the other positions; a transcendental synthesis is ultimately unworkable in the “hybridized post-colonial present.”

However, we should point out that hybridity does not mean a synthesis and/or conservation of two competing identities, as some would claim. Robert Young, in his 1995 book, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race,\(^3\) claims that post-structuralist conceptions of hybridity ultimately “conserve” the identities they seek to deconstruct. For Young, hybridity is nothing but a botanist term based on cross-species pollination. The term strikes Young as a post-colonial remnant of the “vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right,” which regarded black Africans and Caucasians as two separate races (10). However, Young ignores the important ways in which post-structuralists use the language of the dominant structure in order to re-organize it from within. As Bhabha has noted, hybridity is deconstructive because it calls into question, and doesn’t merely conserve, traditional concepts of identity:

A contingent borderline experience opens up in-between colonizer and colonized. This is a space of cultural and interpretive indecidability produced in the ‘present’ of the colonial moment... The margin of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch ... resists the binary opposition of racial and cultural groups. (LC, 206)

Hybridity, though, does not simply operate between colonizer and colonized, but rather \textit{within} post-colonial and/or African philosophies. In addition, hybridity is not without its critical moment of resistance because, for Bhabha, “resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention” but rather is the “effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference.”\(^37\) For Spivak, the post-colonial

is a deconstructive case. As follows: Those of us from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate with each other and with the metropolis to exchange and to establish sociality and transnationality, because we have had access to the culture of imperialism. Shall we then assign to that culture, in the words of the ethical philosopher Bernard Williams, a measure of “moral luck”? I think there can be no question that the answer is “no.” This impossible “no” to a structure which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately, is the deconstructive philosophical position, and the everyday here and now of “post-coloniality” is a case of it.\(^38\)


\(^38\) Ibid.
More than anyone else, Lucius Outlaw has been instructive in elucidating what Eze has called, in working through the quotation from Spivak above, "the critical project ... in double gesture" of African philosophy (PC, 14). Outlaw takes up Spivak's "impossible 'no'" (which, as an impossible no is also, not unproblematically, an affirmation) in reading African philosophy as a deconstructive/reconstructive case:

When read in the context of the history of Western philosophy as narrated by the predominant voices and practiced by the predominant figures in general and against the explicit derogations of African peoples by a number of these figures in particular, the advent of discussions about "African P/philosophy"39 is, by force of historical contingencies, necessarily deconstructive: Philosophy, both as practice and accomplishment, had been reserved for the most capable few among the peoples privileged to be the "agents of the universe," peoples who had realized—in fact, were the embodiment of—the Greco-European paradigmatic forms of rational contemplation and understanding as the highest, most definitive, and most divine activities of which true humans are capable. Thus, each instance of African philosophy ... is at the outset, a deconstructive challenge: it decenters the concept of "Philosophy" and its discursive practices into the history of their construction and maintenance, into the historicity of the philosophical anthropology that forms the fabric of their textuality and thus of the race/ethnicity, the gender, and the cultural agenda of the voices in which they became embodied and the practices though which they were constituted and institutionalized (RP, 65).

By recognizing the deconstructive force of "African philosophy," both as signifier and what it signifies, Outlaw does not mean that African philosophy is itself "Derridean" (RP, 53). Rather, for Outlaw, the "instance[s] of African philosophy" and "contemporary discussions about 'philosophy' in Africa have been deconstructive" (RP, 53, emphasis added). By bringing together "African" and "P/philosophy," Outlaw argues that any "articulation" of "a philosophizing effort as distinctively African or African-American is, at the outset at least, an important challenge that situates the very idea, as well as the discursive practices, of 'philosophy' into the historicities of their construction and maintenance" (RP, 89, emphasis added). Or, as he otherwise puts it, "in every case—whether through the meaning(s) they give to the term, or on the basis of their interpretations of the work of others, or in terms of the actual efforts of those who do 'African philosophy'—the consequences are the same: deconstruction of philosophy" (65).

In this way, African philosophy, by working at the margins of the dominant colonial and metaphysical discourses, is able to render their blind spots and fissures in order to displace them. For African philosophy, and post-coloniality as well, there is a necessary "double bind" that Bernasconi has rightly depicted: "either African
philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt” (PCAP, 188).

It is because of this *aporia* that African philosophy, for Outlaw, is necessarily both deconstructive and reconstructive, constituting both a displacement of Western philosophy at the same time that it attempts “to recount (i.e. to construct) a (as opposed to the) history of [Africa/] philosophy” (RP, n.41, 213). For Outlaw, the most pertinent case of African philosophy as deconstructive/reconstructive was the Negritude movement, “one of the most deconstructive forms of African philosophizing,” which sought to critique the mental and geographical colonization of Africa at the same time as it “bequeathed an African-centered aesthetics, axiology, and social-political philosophies” (67). Yet, this is itself a deconstructive reading of the Negritude movement, which would seem to fit, no matter how heterogeneous the movement, what Outlaw describes as being “at the outset at least” deconstructive. But the movement quickly fell back into maintaining the dominant framework of opposition between Africa and Europe; its remnants on the continent today have coalesced into an ideology that, in the worst of times, has been used to excuse the atrocities of neo-colonialist dictators.

Nevertheless, we do not disagree with Outlaw’s attempt to read Negritude *otherwise* and to deconstruct the traditional (including our own) reading of the movement. However, we find two problematic assertions by Outlaw that, if improved upon, could bolster his assertions that African philosophy is deconstructive/reconstructive. First, Outlaw describes Negritude as the “most” deconstructive forms of African philosophy, an inappropriate adjective when placed against post-structural practices that have called into question such ready-made evaluative forms. How can we distinguish between most/least when discussing the displacement of Western philosophical practices? Secondly, Outlaw seems at times to conflate “critique” with “deconstruction,” which Derrida has been very careful to maintain as distinguishable practices. It is because of this conflation that Outlaw is able to describe Negritude as the “most deconstructive” of African philosophies since this movement has been the most critical of European philosophical and colonial practices. In unfolding this rupture between the moment of critique and the instances of deconstruction, we would point to the necessary contemporary rupture—that is, the rupture at the heart of the contemporaneous and the rupture that is always contemporary—that problematizes traditional notions of time and thus could account for the double temporality of the (re)construction of African philosophy that Outlaw describes. We do not have the space here to follow Derrida’s extended reading of the relationship between temporality, critique, and deconstruction in texts such as *Specters of Marx*; an extended passage from one of his interviews will have to suffice in pointing us in this direction:

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**Question:** To head-on confrontations, renunciations, or pseudo-exits, you prefer minute but radical displacements. You practice a strategy of displacement.
J.D.: Frontal and simple critiques are always necessary; they are the law of rigor in a moral or political emergency, even if one may question the best formulation for this rigor. This opposition must be frontal and simple to what is happening today in Poland or the Middle East, in Afghanistan, El Salvador, Chile, or Turkey, to the manifestations of racism closer to home and to so many other more singular things that do not go by the name of a State or nation. But it is true—and these two logics must be understood in relation—that frontal critiques always let themselves be turned back and reappropriated into philosophy. Hegel’s dialectic machine is this very machination. It is what is most terrifying about reason. To think the necessity of philosophy would perhaps be to move into places inaccessible to this program of reappropriation. I am not sure that this is simply possible and calculable; it is what escapes from any assurance, and desire in this regard can only affirm itself, enigmatic and endless.40

For Derrida—and here one can read between the lines for an opening to Derrida’s reading of Hamlet’s reckoning that the “time is out of joint” as a precursor to justice in Specters of Marx—there is always the contemporaneous relation between deconstruction and critique, both folding on one another in the logic of the “emergency”—i.e. the emergence out of something, perhaps post/coloniality—which demands frontal and simple critiques, as the writers of the Negritude movement knew well, while at the same time realizing the necessity that a deconstructive logic must move into those places, those ruptures within the texts of philosophy, to disrupt and displace that which is “inaccessible to this program of reappropriation.” If Spivak and Oulaw are correct that post-coloniality and African philosophy, respectively, are deconstructive cases, it must also work within this relation between deconstruction and critique that Derrida describes. On the one hand, a frontal critique of colonialism and its heritage will always operate within the system that it seeks to challenge. On the other hand, this movement will open up relations to deconstructing/reconstructing those traditions, philosophies, and systems, such as those of the African continent and the African diaspora, that have remained “inaccessible” within the maintenance of the dominant system.

This double relation, between critique and deconstruction, if (de)(re)constructive, must not simply reinstate the identitary regime of metaphysics, which has long found its “others” to exclude from history, philosophy, politics, etc. Rather, it must operate not only synchronically between the different “trends” of African philosophy (which are never properly synchronic anyway), but also diachronically in the re/construction of Africa’s past and, consequently, its future, while, as Gdédegesin put it, “resolv[ing] to raise issues crucial to the resolution of the present crisis” (TYP 22). In other words, African philosophy is always “in the making,” as Wiredu argues, “in the hybridized post-colonial present.”
NOTES


2. For excellent summation of the view that race was part and parcel of the Enlightenment project, see Emmanuel Eze, Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future (New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 1 & 2.

3. Indeed, Hallen remarks that though there are similarities between Ptah-hotep's ethics and Yoruban moral epistemology, which he has done much work on, this "does no necessarily mean that a process of direct philosophical transmission or exchange between these two cultures took place" (A Short History of African Philosophy [Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002], p. 7. Henceforth cited as SH).


11. See Carole Pearce, "African Philosophy and the Sociological Thesis" in Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 22 No. 4, 1992, pp. 440-60. Pearce is certainly not the first to question the assumptions of ethno-philosophy; she argues, simplistically, that ethno-philosophers have failed to distinguish "between rational and irrational beliefs ... explorin[g] pseudo conceptual problems arising from beliefs in ... magic" (449). However, she quickly conflates all of African philosophy with ethno-philosophy, arguing as such that African philosophy, as currently formed, replaces "the scientific model with sociological relativism" (450).


Introduction, ed. Richard A. Wright, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984, p. 57. In “The African Philosophical Tradition,” Keita divides the African philosophical tradition into three stages. The first, which Keita argues was the richest era of African philosophy, covers the thought systems of ancient Egypt, with its influence on Greek and subsequently all Western philosophy. The second phase, medieval African thought, was made up, principally, of the interpretation and spread of Islamic thought in the African states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. The third, which Keita views as having been irreparably damaged by the colonial experience, consists in its best instances of works leaning toward politics and literature. For an excellent, if problematic, discussion of Keita’s claims, and an alternative schema of the African philosophical tradition, see M. Akin Makinde, African Philosophy, Culture, and Traditional Medicine (Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1988), pp. 23-58.


22. In testimony from a Kenyan court case included in Sage Philosophy, we can see the ways in which Oruka struggles with defining the meaning of “traditional” given the obvious migration and movement in Kenya between the rural and urban areas. Khaminwa is the lawyer deposing Oruka:

“Khaminwa: Who is a traditional person?

Oruka: A traditional person is one who generally guides his/her life in accordance with the basic beliefs and practices of his/her ethnic community. But one can also be partly traditional and partly modern...

Khaminwa: Let us suppose a man lives in Nairobi (like you do). He goes back home to Siaya once in a while and he greets the people there with the respect they deserve. He also knows that he cannot go opening the door to the house of his mother-in-law...would you call that person traditional?

Oruka: He is traditional or half-traditional depending on exactly how much he practices and respects the customs.

Khaminwa: If you live in Nairobi, customs become irrelevant.

Oruka: The bulk of Kenyans in Nairobi are from rural areas and they often travel back there to visit relatives and act according to customs. And even most of them respect
their respective customs even when living in Nairobi. How then can you say customs are irrelevant in Nairobi?” (SP, 72-3).

23. As we will discuss later, Outlaw finds the Negritude movement as providing the Afro-centric voice necessary to re-center African philosophy from Europe to Africa; one cannot underestimate the importance, politically and philosophically, of this move. However (and this would take some work to show), we would argue that the re-centering accomplished by the Negritude movement itself needs to be deconstructed and de-centered to include the philosophies of the Diaspora, which itself is African while not essentially tied to the continent as an appendage, as Senghor claims.


31. Bodunrin ignores, unlike Hountondji, the distinction between ethno-philosophy performed by Africans and ethnographic work by Westerners or Western trained intellectuals, such as Placide Tempels, in the service of religious missionarism and/or the colonial apparatus.


33. Outlaw argues that these taxonomies are a “sign of the relative maturity of African philosophy as a disciplinary field” (RP, 62). However, he is concerned that Oruka, Hountondji, et al., limit the discipline with “normative rules conditioning” the field: “For at the foundation of such efforts are definitions of what constitutes ‘Philosophy’ or ‘philosophy.’ At the very least, they attempt to recapitulate the meanings various thinkers give to the term. ... The maps and taxonomies that provide the boundaries and contours of the fields themselves become part of that which they seek to define and describe” (62-3). While Outlaw is right in pointing out that one’s philosophic position often dictates how one may “map” the discipline, we would argue that the taxonomists of African philosophy often point to the provisionality—a provisionality that Outlaw would argue for—of their “maps” by describing African philosophy as “in the making,” etc. That is, whatever a Hountondji, an Oruka, or others might argue explicitly,
their recognition that African philosophy is not-yet-contemporary reminds us that African philosophy is never fully present to any topography of the discipline. Secondly, if the taxonomies are but an answer by Oruka and others to the question "what is African philosophy," as surely they are, then these answers are intrinsically part of "that which they seek to define and describe," as Outlaw writes, namely African philosophy. Why, then, does Outlaw deride "the putrid stench" of such questions, if he himself describes such questions as bound up in any description of African philosophy (51)? In other words, we side with those philosophers, from Plato to Heidegger to Serequeberhan to Janz to Derrida, who see the question of philosophy bound up with its practice.

34. For an example of this line of thinking, see Polycarp Ikuenobe, "The Parochial Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and African Philosophy" in Philosophy East & West, August 1997, Vol. 47 Issue 2, pp. 189-211.

35. Ikuenobe argues for a synthesis of the universalist/particularist positions in a "new" universalism.


39. Following Richard Rorty, Outlaw here distinguishes between "Philosophy" as the honored and self-contained tradition of the West and "philosophy," which recognizes itself within a contingent framework amongst other philosophies.
