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The Spiritual Exercise of *Sankofa*: Toward a Post-Colonial, Pluralistic, and Intercultural Philosophy

Philosophy has notably struggled in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to come to terms with how it participated in the erasure and invisibility of persons across the globe.¹ Western philosophy over hundreds of years found itself immersed in the colonial project, in all its economic, social, political, legal, disciplinary, and aesthetic dimensions. Its logic of Western racial superiority, grounded in eugenics, social Darwinism, and deterministic accounts of racial realism, grew and deepened, especially in Europe and the Americas.² No domain was free, even Hugo Grotius' grand work on international law and diplomacy, *Mare Liberum* (*The Free Sea*) was founded in justifying Dutch colonial seizures of ships and resources.³ The haunting of those shorn of their dignity besets us. We have forgotten, in a sense to go "backwards"; not just to "bracket" our stories of the world, but to see the persons we have continued to ignore through certain horizons of dominating meaning. It has been up to these people to find themselves even when under the erasure of the dominant mode of history, and in turn they have much to teach those of us willing to turn back to listen.

But how can and should we turn back? Those who have found themselves in the illuminating darkness have much to teach us here. Ralph Ellison's masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, provides us a vital route backwards. It is the story

1) This first section is drawn from the work of Juan Thurmond. We collaborated on several papers from which the ideas here were taken. I would like to thank him for his friendship, insight, and collaborative care.

2) While I will not have time to discuss it here, in Russia, the invisibilizing colonial logic is an even older phenomenon, and took a different trajectory.

3) Oona Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, "Hugo the Great," *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), chptr. 1.

of an invisibilized personality who, via digging deeper into the background of themselves (biographical, aesthetic, historical, psychological, ethical, and metaphysical), comes to know their own invisibility, and by that process, recognizes and comes into their own concretized and full personality. The novel unfolds the flesh and sinews of this mysterious voice and moves through several distinct phases. To articulate said growth, the narrator has both an outside-and-above voice (or witnessing consciousness), reflecting on his experience, and an inside-and-within voice (or experiencing consciousness), experiencing his own growth. Together, these voices blend into a mirror image of *Phenomenology of Spirit*,⁴ one that explores what arrogant *Aufhebung* assumed it brought into itself as the labor of the negative, but really dismissed and erased, even though these persons' tales continued. What history could be recovered from the invisible recognizing itself? This is the task Ellison puts at center of the novel.

The narrator of *Invisible Man* notes: "outside the Brotherhood [the Marxist organization he works for] we [people of color] were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us."⁵ In the abstraction of triumphalist-progressive dialectic (even if putatively anti-colonial), those who do not serve its story of necessity are cast off as irrelevant, or are rendered empty symbols, and within it they are negatively prehended (i.e., felt) objects of history. They are left out of the story Hegel started in the West of "inside" (in-itself) and "outside" (for-itself) arriving as a whole, (i.e., history with a capital "H"). Hegel explicitly acknowledged not only the eddies of dialectic,⁶ but such irrelevant persons/places, and thought it was important to clarify such outside status:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.⁷

Hegel argued that for a number of reasons (including geographic isolation), Africa (and especially Sub-Saharan Africa), was not able to rise from mythic vitalism to theism (or having a demarcated relation to the absolute). He recognized Africa's irrelevancy to his "History" and mere subjugatory role in the logic of Western imperial civilization/colonization (and defended the enslavement of Africans by that line of reasoning).⁸ By doing so, he rendered invisible much of the world in service of a sophisticated philosophical abstraction. Further, those included, for example Carthaginians, are rendered invisible; their own dignity and history is erased for the purposes of another story.⁹

4) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

5) Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 499.

6) What Hegel called "bad infinities" or a dialectic that goes nowhere. For more, see: Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 100–102 [paragraph 162–164].

7) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener, Canada: Batoche Books, 2001), 117.

8) "Another characteristic fact in reference to the Negroes is Slavery. Negroes are enslaved by Europeans and sold to America. Bad as this may be, their lot in their own land is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists; for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing – an object of no value. Among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent." Ibid., 113–14.

9) The Slavic world was also considered to be largely irrelevant to the "history of spirit," or at least of no major importance. For example, see Ibid., 120.

Although the abstraction is one of the most efficacious and robust in human thought, it does not carry, via the labor of the negative, all of experience in all its richness. As invisibilized, other persons and places are carried, but not fully captured (rather subjugated). Further these persons and places are affected themselves by their deemed irrelevancy. Other persons and places, worthy of dignity, are rendered invisible in Hegelian historical dialectic and, in his view, these were *necessary* sacrifices for the further enriched history of spirit. Hegel believed his negative prehensions of other persons and places were necessary, and that he ultimately carried these persons and place, in any important sense, in his philosophy. One may question the motives of Hegel's vision of necessity, and its urge to erase peoples and places in its name. "Therefore, be not confused. It is to break with the delusions of Hegel's ailments. For that which is presented here is a space of possibilities, not absolutes. The centers of activity, insofar as they affect configurations of action and cognition, deal significantly with the interplay of tragicomic sensibilities."¹⁰

The tragicomic narrator of *Invisible Man* realizes toward the end of the novel the farcical blindness of abstraction that denies the quality of personhood it has negated. With this revelation, the inside-within narrator, beginning to blend with outside and above narrator, has a moment of deep personal and philosophical catharsis:

And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they define me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices. And because they were blind they would destroy themselves and I'd help them. Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men... For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke.¹¹

The author comes back to himself in an act of recovery [*sankofa*]. He realizes that only in his feeling, in the most concrete, does he recognize himself as invisible, and can become his own unified story, albeit one outside of, and in rejection to, the dominant mode of colonialized history. Ellison recognizes the primacy and tragedy of our confidence in the world as seen in the light of our own activity, the horizons of meaning we create for ourselves. The darkness always lurks behind and before, and we often leave to it ghosts of personalities we have ignored in our own hubris. This blindness in the light of day blocks the road to recovery, to a post-colonial world.

Ellison then teaches us the spiritual exercise (*askesis*) of *sankofa*. As I have noted elsewhere, "The word originates in the Twi language of Ghana and is a central idea in Akan culture. It is often symbolized in Akan

10) Juan Thurmond, "Whiteheadian Meditations: The Intensity of Experience in Black Prophetic Thought," *Tenth International Whitehead Conference* (Claremont, CA: Claremont Colleges, June 7, 2015), 3. I thank him for my personal copy of the essay.

11) Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 509.

art as a bird craning its neck backwards to look at its backside.”¹² *Sankofa* is meant to serve the process of restorative/transformatory justice:

An Akan courtly word which means to return and retrieve. I have heard it applied to unrepentant individuals during adjudication to urge them to own up to their wrongdoing: that is, there is nothing wrong in saying one is wrong. In this way the individual's sentence is reduced considerably. Again, during deliberations an elder may err in protocol and when reminded of it would quickly correct himself in order to avoid paying a penalty. From the socio-historical and political standpoint, it is incumbent on the elders to correct or undo a past injustice within the context of *sankofa*. The point is, it's perfectly legal for the elders – in fact, it is their moral and civic duty – to review the past in hopes of ameliorating the present and the future.¹³

Juan Thurmond has described *sankofa* as “a way of *looking forward through the rearview mirror in hindsight*.”¹⁴ Societal trauma in this sense is an opportunity to imaginatively retrace (hindsight), our past unfolding situation (the review mirror), to try and see who we might have missed and dismissed (including ourselves), so we can address the damage done through transformational recognition (looking forward). It requires looking back to the past (first order of backward movement), to see if we can care for who is beyond our accounts (second order of backwards movement). *Sankofa* is seeking for the persons that have been deemed irrelevant by our own stories. This practice of recovery can be done by both dominant and subjugated persons and communities. It is a history in the retelling from the perceived margins (centers themselves), not history as unfolded from the perceived center (egocentric in its assumptions). These exercises of retelling and recovering of persons, told by those rooted in these communities, are what are shared with us in the Thematic Section of this issue of *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*. They provide us our best chances at turning back to go forward together toward a decolonized and brighter post-colonial future.

The first work of *sankofa* is by Victor Peterson II, “Collective Improvisations.” He seeks to develop a formal, logically insightful account of how black persons can find their own invisible identity, in which their existence is not reduced to predetermined reductive concepts but rather are how they ever re-inhabit their identity and reconstruct and re-express it. This is the way they collectively improvise their identity(ies) as community(ies). While Peterson II offers us insight into how communities can recover a formal account of the dynamism and creativity of their own identities under the reductive invisibilization of the colonizing narratives of empires, Andrew Ka Pok Tam illuminates how a community can draw on its own works of philosophy to call out their own (or rather their state's) acts of erasure and genocide. In “Confucian Multiculturalism: A Kantian Reinterpretation of the *Classic of Rites*,” Ka Pok Tam illuminates how the Confucian *Classic of Rites* provides the resources for Chinese to recognize and protect the dignity of those in their pluralistic nation who are being forced by their own government (through violent erasure), to become a part of a Han Chinese monoculture. Against this attempt, with a Kantian reconstruction of the Chinese *Jing* (敬, as respect), they can continue to support the practice of *sankofa*, while not drawing on the imperializing logics of invisibilization. This practice is vital to fight against the erasure of Uyghur culture and identity in Xinjiang, and to defend the autonomous and diverse democracy in Hong Kong.

12) Eli Kramer, *Intercultural Modes of Philosophy, Volume One: Principles to Guide Philosophical Community, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Text and Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers 2021), 177.

13) As quoted in: Christel N. Temple, “The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States,” *Journal of Black Studies* 41, no. 1 (September 2010): 138–39.

14) Thurmond, “Whiteheadian Meditations.”

Aïda C. Terblanché-Greeff and Petrus Nel in “Undertaking Empirically-Engaged African Philosophy: The Development and Validation of the African Time Inventory,” show us how to recover a better sense of the polyphony of modalities of cultural duration. They illuminate that attending to the modalities of diverse communities in their own contexts can help us address cross cultural conflict. We can then see what we miss by taking our own sense of time as normative. In particular, we have much to learn from *African time*: against the pejorative reading of it in South Africa. The African Time Inventory (ATI) becomes a vital tool for *sankofa* practice, for recovering the vitality of the diverse qualitative durations that make up our cultural polyphony.

Our Thematic Section concludes with Renz M. Vilacampa’s essay “Like Marginalia in the Canon of the Oppressors: Critical Theorizing at the Margin and Attempts for Redemptive Alternatives.” Vilacampa cautions us not to treat *sankofa* as a progressive social project that the West can adopt to salve their wounds for the damage they have done to so many communities by taking on the persona of heroes and a general messianic complex. He reminds us that the work of *sankofa* begins from the perceived margins not from the center of the erasing narrative. These communities have their own redemptive tales and projects we need to attend to, that we can support in solidarity to make change.

Our Forum section begins with an essay very relevant to our exploration of the practice of *sankofa*. Charles Herrman in his essay “The Honor-Based Society, Past and Present,” explores what he sees as the dominant modality of most world cultures: being honor-based, as opposed to a minority of dignity-based cultures. By attending to the differences between the ethical structures of each modality we find insight into certain priorities, from justice to dignity.

Finally, Jean-Paul Martinon in “The Museum’s Fourth Future” considers the meaning and purpose of museums for future generations beyond the trite narrative they utilize: that they preserve the past for the future, maintaining the present order, with its colonial legacy and project of invisibilization that *sankofa* seeks to heal. Martinon unpacks this surface orientation as a naïve forecast of the future, as an extension of the present, planning to continue the budget and bureaucratic organization of today, and as the abandonment of any final end, instead seeking to cover all contingencies through a managerial mode of organization. This future is never satisfactory or fulfilled. He concludes the piece by looking at the future through progeny (despite its dangers to justify the current paradigm), as the “relaying of hope itself,” that is the openness toward what comes that is not our mere projections of the current order of things.



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