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إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

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Making the Future - Bridges to Future Traditions

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5 - 9 / 12 / 2011

Rabat Maroc / Morocco

Archiving the African Diaspora

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Telos and Tradition

Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912), Pan-African progenitor of the concept 'African personality,' books such as A Voice from Bleeding Africa on Behalf of Her Exiled Children (1856), A Vindication of the African Race Being a Brief Examination of the Arguments in Favor of African Inferiority (1857) and Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race (1887) believed that once African civilization achieved equal power with all other civilizations images of Africans as primitive would dissipate. Africans would then be seen as dignified because they would own and control the land of their birth. The ascendance of Africans from a state of abject racial subordination in the diasporas and colonial oppression in Africa was, for Blyden, inevitable. African ascendancy would be a regeneration of its past glory, vindication for all the wrongs Africans have suffered, and realization of the intrinsic character traits of Africans. Blyden considered Islam's history and then current practices preferable to the African Christian heritage and practices because Christian missionaries promoted subservience among its African converts and Islam required the conquered to become dignified. Evidence of the existence or emergence of dignity within a social formation, religious communities or otherwise, gained credence on his account. Ascendancy to modernity with dignity was, for Blyden, the telos of Africans. Providence assured the accomplishment of the African telos; the logic of the unfolding of history pointed to the eventual ascendancy of African civilization; and the realization of the nature of each racial groups' intrinsic cultural personality was the outcome of its unfolding nature. For Blyden, history was linear - events are serial moments forming a line from past glory through catastrophe, culminating in grand achievements. Consequently, the future is imminent in the present and the present hides a nascent future.

By implication, one central role of archives is to be repositories of possibly otherwise lost records of the nascent future.

It is nice to imagine that each event contributes to the creation of significant future events. As a metaphor, we can imagine that when one rock hits another rock the impact on the

second rock is recorded as a 'memory.' In this way, each event can be imagined as a record contributing to the outcome of significant events by their trace. Cumulative results can be imagined as coalescing to form a nice neat bundle of significant moments. Archives can be seen as repositories that help form the material trace of a linear history. Such illusions should be abandoned.

Imagine the following: that the universe, and human history, are amoral. Rather than a perfect memory repository where good is rewarded and bad is punished by unseen forces, human history is as amoral as the rest of the universe - a universe where material nor immaterial phenomenon are memory repositories. That is, imagine that individual lives, like a thousand languages, ethnic groups, religious movements and benevolent societies have died leaving no record and no reason to believe that their contributions will be rewarded, bad acts punished nor sufferings vindicated. Given this imagination, the impact on the second rock is a metaphor, not a memory. The trace of the first rock is imperfect; and human history is not mirrored by nor in the natural universe. Given that history is not linear, Blyden's admonitions and their implications - and possibly other forms of historicism that rely on linear accounts that presuppose a moral universe - need reconsideration.

I describe several research activities as a way to reconsider Blyden's admonitions and their implications for archives. The Philosophy Born of Struggle tradition and archives, the Alain L. Locke Archive, Moorland Spingarn Collection, Howard University, and research activities that try to rediscover the African names of African American slaves will be the focus.

"Philosophy Born of Struggle" as a Tradition

Resistance traditions are distinguished by a concern with radical social change for the purpose of universal human liberation. That concern is expressed by arguments for justified methods of social action to create change, accounts of why humanity should change, evaluations of conditions of misery, depictions of what and why there are unnecessary maldistribution of resources and unjust disparities. I believe that resistance traditions are theoretically rewarding, suggestive of the unique circumstances of African Americans, and the source of rewarding arguments embedded in the specificity of African American life.

The secular resistance tradition in African American culture is a historical community of debate, exchange, and mutual support. Secular resistance traditions are deeply webbed in

theological views. Yet, secular approaches use different argument strategies, terms, references, authority figures, and methods of argument. Secular justifications for social actions, for example, do not require an account of how such actions accord with sacred texts. Nor do they require an account of how unwarranted social conditions such as the suffering of innocent children accord with the directives of dieties, sacred texts, invectives, or intentions. Theological arguments for social change rely on texts considered sacred and characteristically provide accounts of the suffering of innocents that accord with supernatural or extra-human intentions. Argument strategies, terms, references, authority figures, and methods of argument are often shared by both the secular and sacred traditions within communities of resistance. Thus the secular and the sacred are not always neatly distinguished in the works of a given author.

Resistance traditions, both secular and sacred, are replete with the belief that our deeds are indelibly etched in human history. Moreover, actions are believed to be in some way reflective of what it is to live a flourishing, honorable, esteemable and enviable life. Actions are normally considered reflective of esteemable or condemnable intrinsic, natural, or biologically determined character traits. Consequently, for the secular and sacred streams of the resistance tradition, how individuals live is taken to be meaningful in a moral universe; a universe that is structured and embedded with moral truth. What politics a person favored, however, is not always a matter of a simple deduction from their general values or religious beliefs. Some persons believed that slaves have a positive duty to rebel or at least escape slavery, yet, they might also believe that that duty should not be executed because it was not efficacious. Or they might believe that African Americans have a right to be self-determined as a group, but believe that it is in their best interest to remain Americans rather than migrate to Africa. However, values and religious beliefs are generally important and informative guides in helping to decide social and political preferences.

Free African Christian emigrants and explorers to the early Americas, or Africans converted to Christianity in the West Indies, shared a common religious faith with other new arrivals from Europe. Some African Americans prior to approximately the 1820's considered ethnic or racial unity as a misguided goal or a less compelling goal than the need to promote principles of faith. The first series of conferences by African Americans to address their plight, for example, were not convened until the 1850's because a conference sponsored for, and by,

African Americans only was considered anathema to the important cause of race-blind inclusion.

As racial slavery increased, and thereby the enslavement of free Christian Africans, the role of ethnic and racial identity radically changed. Once shared religious faith in America was obviously irrelevant to who was enslaved, shared ethnic and racial unity became a legitimate reason not only to host conferences but also to organized political and civic associations.

Philosophy Born of Struggle: Afro-American Philosophy from 1917 (1983) begins at the point where African Americans developed philosophical arguments in a literate Christian dominated tradition; a tradition that became increasingly secular. In addition, it begins with the significant rise in a sense of peoplehood. African Americans are a racialized ethnicity. That is, they are an ethnic group, as a diaspora African people and also as a racialized population, i.e., defined as and seen as a black population of persons descendent from sub-Saharan Africa. In the early period of American history, authors used Negro, African, or coloured as an identity marker. The ethnogenesis of black identity, as a racial group, and African identity as an ethnic group, were coterminous.

Beginning in 1994, the Philosophy Born of Struggle Association (PBS) began sponsoring an annual conference, initiated by J. Evertt Green at Rockland Community College, New York. The themes of each conference is consonant with themes from Philosophy Born of Struggle, Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917. Such themes as "Explorations in a Black Philosophy of Culture," "Legitimation Crisis in American Philosophy," "Re-Thinking the Intellectual Life," "Philosophy and Liberation," and "Philosophy and the Scientific Spirit" are the focus of papers. Various conference presentations are recorded at each conference. Interviews of individuals began in 2004. The PBS Archives, established in 2009, are located at the Black Cultural Center Library, Purdue University. They are the largest digital (DVD) repository of philosophers concerned with issues of race, ethnicity, black identity and the African heritage; they are the largest digital repository of individual interviews of such philosophers (forty five interviews); largest repository of interviews of African American philosophers. It is the only archive dedicated to Africana philosophy. The complete collection is available on line at PBOS.COM.

Philosophy, on my account, is most valuable when its authors and texts are decidedly dedication to liberation. The pursuit of ultimate truths, propositions expressing essences, or

intrinsic property, besides being pursuits founded on fundamentally misguided assumptions about the existence of their object, are pursuits unworthy of human effort in the midst of a planet beset with preventable misery.

It has been argued that the impact of racism frequently shapes African American existential concern with immediate social conditions, even when an African American philosopher concentrates on rather esoteric issues such as the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* logical constructions. Their feelings angst about interest in esoteric issues rather than solutions to social problems have been well recorded in interviews.[Yancy] It is, however, false that African American philosophers are necessarily concerned with liberation even when they are concerned with immediate social plights, and those who are concerned with liberation, often have radically different views. Contemporary African American philosophers frequently communicate with one another; that communication is made easier than in the past because of such organizations as the Caribbean Philosophical Association, the Alain Locke Society and the Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy - all came into existence after the Philosophy Born of Struggle Association. It is, however, false that African American philosophers in the early twentieth century frequently communicated with one another. They almost never debated the warrant of conflicting opinions. Prior to the annual conferences of Philosophy Born of Struggle, conferences dedicated to issues most dear to African Americans were rare. "African American Philosophy" described in 1983 a history of distinct movements that, when viewed from a third person perspective could be seen as a coherent collection. In fact, its members never saw themselves as forming a coherent community, but at best, a struggling collection of different persons, always victims of racism.

In 1983 I looked at this diffused collection of philosophers from a third person, objective, standpoint and imposed an order. I defined that collection as the progenitor of a growing movement; it became the heritage of "African American Philosophy." I described the heritage in the "Introduction" to Philosophy Born of Struggle as both an historical fact - a resistance tradition - and a creation. Of the twenty one authors in the anthology, only three could be described as revolutionary. All the other authors were at best liberals. All of the authors, including the revolutionaries, were academicians. I defined the authors as members of a 'resistance tradition' such that 'resistance' meant, narrowly, to be against racism. However, its

broader connotation meant 'revolutionary.' 'Resistance tradition' thus functioned at least as a double entendre.

"African American Philosophy" is now a recognized area of philosophy by the American Philosophical Association. There are far more frequent articles about the struggles, sufferings, and accomplishments of African American philosophers than existed in 1983. African American philosophers are capable of being seen as agents, not Humean monkeys aping Europeans; authors of philosophies due serious consideration at least partially because there is a trace; a record.

The PBS Archives arguably contributes to shaping a heritage - making some features of philosophic dialogue present while, unintentionally, fortuitously, leaving other dialogues outside the pale of its collection and thereby most likely, if authored by an African American in the midst of a racist profession of philosophy, left silent, unrecorded; at best a scratch on the second rock but not at all a perfect memory.

The Alain L. Locke Archive, Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University is the home of the bequeath of America's most noted philosopher and arguably one of the most noted of African descent. The archive is judiciously maintained by JoEllen El Bashir, the daughter of the artist Ed Payne from Tuskegee, Alabama. Alain Locke (1885-1954) graduated in philosophy from Harvard University, 1907. Locke was the first black Rhodes scholar, studying at Oxford, 1907-10, Hertford College, and then the University of Berlin, 1910-11 with Georg Simmel, founder of sociology and Hugo Münsterberg, a philosopher and psychologist significantly influencing the meaning of William James and pragmatism. Locke received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard in 1918. Locke taught at Howard University, Washington, D.C. for almost 40 years, until retirement in 1953, receiving an Honorary Doctorate from Howard in 1954. Locke helped shape classical pragmatism and authored a philosophy: Critical Pragmatism. He was the principle author of concepts guiding the Harlem Renaissance, theoretical resource for the Black Arts Movement and members of the Adult Education movement that considered cultural learning an educational attainment.

Locke submitted his doctoral thesis to his advisor, Ralph B. Perry, the biographer of William James, the founder of pragmatism, in 1917 and graduated with the 1918 class. Locke's submission of his dissertation in 1917 marks the transition from philosophy steeped in theology to philosophy completely secular; authorship of a unique philosophy that would have a life

within and outside the academy. It also marks a valuable moment of historiography: the reason we know when Locke submitted his dissertation is because he saved the comments from his advisor, letters from his advisor, hand written dates and notes on his copy of his dissertation. We do not have this sort of record for any other African American philosopher.

The primary resource for the Biography of a Philosopher: Alain L. Locke (2010) was his archives. There is only one other biography of an African American philosopher. The other biography, Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine, was written prior to a substantive archive being established at the University of Pennsylvania.

It is possible to discuss the relationship of Locke's philosophy to his life, as well as discuss his philosophy independent of his life, because of the great corpus of publications, letters, photographs and memorabilia he left. There is no evidence that a mysterious hand of history was responsible for the existence of Locke's papers. There is no evidence that the papers of the last generation of African American philosophers are being recovered. Whatever contribution the last generation made is not only lost, we have no reason to believe it invariably caused or shaped the ascendancy of the resistance tradition as a tradition that is being recovered and currently saved. The idea of a pristine recordable nascent future in the present is arguably a misguided goal.

Archives help shape what kind of memories we have - the memory is not there as a neat compendium of facts but a compendium of values made real by what becomes untrammelled facts of life. What lives, then, is at least in part decidable in a world of unpredictable future identities and needs. The meaning of 'African' is unfinished in the sense described by V.Y. Mudimbe in The Invention of Africa, namely, that the meaning of 'African' has a history and is currently shaped by a sense of common geographic ancestry with an undertow of a common ethnic, racial and cultural kind. It is also trailed by anti-black racism, stereotypes of 'uncivilized' agents, dependent beggars and violent and irrational criminals. Future people will decide what the unfinished 'African' will be and existing people how to destroy the degradation, stereotypes, and racist bigotry befalling African people.

It is up to us to finish the 'African' to be placed on the stage for future people to reshape because there is no teleological end as a neat coalescing of untrammelled memories. *Eo ipso* Mudimbi's 'African' is always a subject and object. The illusion is that it is an object only; a thing waiting to be realized, discovered, preserved. Rather, realization is the site of

simultaneous transposition; momentary stability; transvaluation. There is no intrinsic logic. That is the delusion of historicist reason - it proffers a constant search for a logic that will unfold in a history that is driven by reason, regeneration, redemption, vindication and self realization. The absolute villainy of the slave catcher; accountants on slave ships counting the value of pregnant women raped by sailors and young boys about to be made into eunuchs; colonizers with superior weapons burning villages to make a path for railroad tracks; merchants of weapons and fatigues to the most vicious of groups controlling itinerate diamond mines are certainly sources causing us to need redemption stories; such stories make the suffering purposeful; the suffering is imaged as precursor to a grand outcome.

Trauma is that emotion that grips the spirit when it is fully appreciates that there are no regeneration, redemption, vindication and self realization stories matching reality. Suffering is real and often without redemption or vindication for those that suffered. Given that there is no moral universe nor linear history, only traces, there is ascendancy and that, while not capable of saving all the records or the lives lost, is a goal making the bridges we build to the future worthy of our heritage creations and tradition formations.

We need there to be a trace. It is compelling. The need is a condition of our being. It is what makes our lives existentially meaningful to us. We record the meaning, not the universe. An image of the future gives the sacrifices of the present a meaning and purpose. One feature of Locke's philosophy provides a way to see why traces, embedded in the records of archives, have an import far beyond the sheer fact of records as memories and why they have that import in a way that has nothing to do with contributing to a linear history in a moral universe: For Locke, universally appreciated aesthetic forms of the beautiful are often created from local folk culture. In this way that which is local, provincial, and parochial can become universal. When such cultural goods carry universal meritorious traits, populations that are the source of such creations enhance popular perceptions of them as worthy of respect and dignity. Conviviality between the local and the cosmopolitan is created in such cases. Minorities, parochial communities, partisans of ethnic and racial groups across social strata can achieve dignity - recognition of worth by others as a function, not of a static essence, unchanging character traits, or a ubiquitous racial personality, but as a function of the continual reality of transvaluation that creates the possibility of the local making its voice universal. And to be dignified or honored [Harris] is to be shown deference. Deference is accorded because of a persons' or

groups' presumed possession of intrinsic magnanimous goods such as courage, trustworthiness or self-discipline. Heroic Africans, like heroic Polynesians or Latin Americans, are always stoic and reserved; these are universal traits [Wiredu] defining what it is to be heroic - always with local features that give such traits their texture. And if Locke is right, generalizations such as 'heroic' are not terms referring to singular essences, forms, or properties mirrored in the universe, but complex valuations. Aesthetics goods such as symmetry or balance, for example, when expressed by parochial cultural formations whether Yoruba, African American, or Afro-Peruvian express traits that elicit deference. Consequently, one import of the sheer existence of archives as repositories is that they are in at least in some cases simultaneous local tradition sustainers and crafters, thereby making possible an accord of dignity and honor to the peoples who authored the collection. That is their trace.

Blyden's picture of a linear history encoded in a moral universe is an ill-advised guide for archiving; but his desire for ascending with dignity remains a worthy target and reason for creating bridges to the future.