

THE AFRICAN OTHER
PHILOSOPHY, JUSTICE AND THE SELF

Edited by Abraham Olivier



ROUTLEDGE

The African Other

This book provides a much-needed philosophical response to the recurrent postcolonial call to uproot the prevalent workings of the colonial regime, with a close focus on the African context.

The work addresses a range of questions concerning the othering of Africans in the postcolonial context, specifically by focusing on the philosophical analysis of problems of justice, the effect of injustice on the formation of the self, and strategies of resistance against the injustice of othering. Questions raised in this collection include: who or what is “the other”? Who is the “African other”? In what ways are Africans othered? What is the effect of unjust conditions on the formation of the self? In what sense is othering an injustice? How can justice concern itself with the problem of othering? What are the strategies to resist the injustice of othering? Can one ever do justice to the experience of the subaltern other in abstract terms of philosophical analysis?

In considering these questions, this book will be of interest to all those studying the intersectional ways in which colonial injustice is manifested in the postcolony, as well as those seeking greater philosophical reflection on postcolonial justice. This book was originally published as a special issue of *Angelaki*.

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The African Other

Philosophy, Justice and the Self

Edited by
Abraham Olivier

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN13: 978-0-367-35662-0

Typeset in Bodoni
by Newgen Publishing UK

Publisher's Note

The publisher accepts responsibility for any inconsistencies that may have arisen during the conversion of this book from journal articles to book chapters, namely the inclusion of journal terminology.

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Contents

<i>Citation Information</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	x
Abraham Olivier	
Introduction – The African Other: Philosophy, Justice and The Self	1
<i>Abraham Olivier</i>	
Part I Problems of Justice	
1 Justice Through Deliberation and The Problem of Otherness	9
<i>Uchenna Okeja</i>	
2 Consensual Recognition of Universal Rights in African Custom	21
<i>Christopher Allsobrook</i>	
3 Implicitly Racist Epistemology: Recent Philosophical Appeals to The Neurophysiology of Tacit Prejudice	33
<i>Helen Lauer</i>	
Part II Formations of The Self	
4 Breaking the Gridlock of the African Postcolonial Self-imagination: Marx against Mbembe	47
<i>M. John Lamola</i>	
5 <i>Ressentiment</i> in the Postcolony: A Nietzschean Analysis of Self and Otherness	60
<i>Veeran Naicker</i>	
6 Can I Choose to Be Who I Am Not? On (African) Subjectivity	77
<i>Katrin Flikschuh</i>	

Part III Strategies Against Othering

7	A Most Dangerous Error: The Boasian Myth of a Knock-down Argument against Racism <i>Robert Bernasconi</i>	91
8	Steve Biko: Black Consciousness and the African Other – The Struggle for the Political <i>Michael Cloete</i>	103
9	Rebellion and Revolution <i>Pedro Tabensky</i>	115
10	The African Animal Other: Decolonizing Nature <i>Louise du Toit</i>	129
	<i>Index</i>	142

Citation Information

The chapters in this book were originally published in the *Angelaki CANG Journal*, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019). When citing this material, please use the original page numbering for each article, as follows:

Foreword

Abraham Olivier

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 1

Introduction

The African Other: Philosophy, Justice and The Self

Abraham Olivier

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 2–9.

Chapter 1

Justice Through Deliberation and the Problem of Otherness

Uchenna Okeja

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 10–21.

Chapter 2

Consensual Recognition of Universal Rights in African Custom

Christopher Allsobrook

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 22–33.

Chapter 3

Implicitly Racist Epistemology: Recent Philosophical Appeals to The Neurophysiology of Tacit Prejudice

Helen Lauer

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 34–47.

Chapter 4

Breaking the Gridlock of the African Postcolonial Self-imagination: Marx against Mbembe

M. John Lamola

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 48–60.

Chapter 5

Resentment in the Postcolony: A Nietzschean Analysis of Self and Otherness

Veeran Naicker

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 61–77.

Chapter 6

Can I Choose to Be Who I Am Not? On (African) Subjectivity

Katrin Flikschuh

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 78–91.

Chapter 7

A Most Dangerous Error: The Boasian Myth of a Knock-down Argument against Racism

Robert Bernasconi

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 92–103.

Chapter 8

Steve Biko: Black Consciousness and the African Other – The Struggle for the Political

Michael Cloete

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 104–115.

Chapter 9

Rebellion and Revolution

Pedro Tabensky

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 116–129.

Chapter 10

The African Animal Other: Decolonizing Nature

Louise du Toit

Angelaki CANG Journal, volume 24, issue 2 (April 2019) pp. 130–142.

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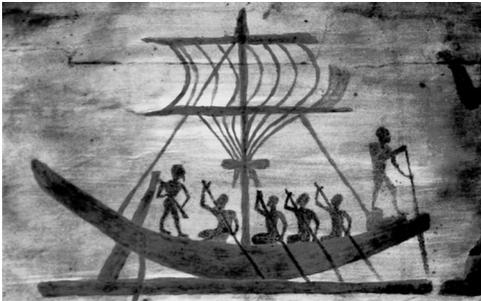
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This collection can be considered as part of a much-needed philosophical response to the recurrent postcolonial call to uproot the prevalent workings of the colonial regime, with a close focus on the African context. It addresses a range of questions concerning the othering of Africans in the postcolonial context, specifically by focusing on the philosophical analysis of problems of justice, the effect of injustice on the formation of the self, and strategies of resistance against the injustice of othering. Questions raised in this collection include: who or what is “the other”? Who is the “African other”? In what ways are Africans othered? What is the effect of unjust conditions on the formation of the self? In what sense is othering an injustice? How can justice concern itself with the problem of othering? What are the strategies

FOREWORD

abraham olivier

to resist the injustice of othering? Can one ever do justice to the experience of the subaltern other in abstract terms of philosophical analysis?



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Consideration of the prevalent workings of the colonial regime in the African context gives rise to critical philosophical questions of justice, the self and the other. Who is the “African Other”? Who is justified to call themselves African, and who may speak out for or about Africans? If colonialism and apartheid have not, to use Du Bois’s term, “labelled” one as a black African, and therefore as a being of another, lesser kind, if one has not suffered the injustice to be made the “African Other,” can one really say one is an African? If one is no real African in this sense, can one at least choose to be who one is not – can one choose to be an African? How does one speak out against “othering” Africans? Can one ever do justice to the experience of the subaltern other in abstract terms of philosophical analysis? How does one speak about those who are othered by regimes of injustice? In what sense is othering an injustice? How can justice concern itself with the otherness and othering of the other?

These are recurrent and puzzling philosophical questions. They are very much alive, prompted by current postcolonial discourse on otherness and incited by recent publications in philosophy on decolonization, transformation and Africanization, particularly in the present African context, but not exclusively so.¹ Contemporary postcolonial discourse on otherness comes from critical reflection on intersectional modalities of exclusion in race, nationality, culture, class, gender, sexuality, religion and, to a lesser extent, species.² This includes criticism of the injustice committed by colonial conceptual frameworks, methodologies and practices, which make exclusion possible on

INTRODUCTION

abraham olivier

THE AFRICAN OTHER *philosophy, justice and the self*

various intersecting levels. Modern colonialism was, as Paul Taylor puts it, an “[...] intersectional project: it mobilised, manipulated, shaped and reshaped the meanings and practices that we refer to in ideas such as race, gender, sexuality, nation and class.” (Taylor 213) The critical result is “the various supremacist projects that helped to make the world we now inhabit – privileging white, propertied, heterosexual men over other kinds of people, robustly imagined as *other* kinds.”³ A seminal feature of the disastrous impact of colonial injustice is its systematic formation of categories that have radically shaped the identity of people and their world. It is worthwhile quoting Taylor extensively on this point:

Modern colonialism was, as much as it was anything else, a complex regime for the formation of certain kinds of human subjects. It was a system for making selves that would imagine the world and their places in it in ways that fit with, say, the co-optation of white labour with visions of imperial adventure and with the expropriation of black, brown and red land and labour through arguments about savagery and civilisation. (214)

This citation points succinctly to the problem that this collection addresses. The title, “The African Other,” may appear othering. However, it is intended to draw renewed attention to the way Africans have been made “the others.” Colonialism was a system, to use Taylor’s phrasing, for “making African selves” to be subjects of another, lesser, kind, “the others,” and deprived of the benefit and protection of the law. The problem is that the colonial system is still alive in the “postcolony”⁴ and calls for renewed thinking, for critical questioning, criticism and resistance of the continued influence of colonial projects on our practices. This goes not least for “societies where negative racial stereotypes, ostensibly and explicitly deplored, are covertly and illicitly reinforced.”⁵

The need to address and resist the workings of the colonial regime might appear to be a matter of high priority within the realm of academic philosophy. This is what the number of recent discussions and publications in philosophy on decolonization, transformation and Africanization at least seem to suggest. But this picture is deceiving. As Paul Taylor points out, for instance, “[...] postcoloniality is not on the agenda or even on the radar of Angloanalytic philosophy, even among scholars concerned with subjects – such as global justice – that seem to point towards it” (212). This also goes, more than one might expect, for philosophy in South Africa and in many other African countries, where philosophical curricula, especially, still reflect the prevailing dominance of the colonial legacy of Western philosophy. This epistemic colonial hegemony is illustrated by recent data on the curriculum and other offerings at philosophy departments

in Southern and West Africa in a recent (2018) paper on “The State of African Philosophy in Africa” by Etieyibo and Chimakonam. In summary, their observation is “[...] that (1) philosophy programs in many of the universities in sub-Saharan Africa are westernized; (2) there are minimal courses offered in African philosophy in those universities” (Etieyibo and Chimakonam 85). Ramose, after De Sousa Santos (*Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* 92), calls this predominance epistemic murder, or epistemicide: “The epistemicide committed at colonisation was left virtually intact by ensuring that the coloniser’s epistemological paradigm shall remain dominant” (Ramose 548). Epistemicide is an illustrative term for the prevailing subjugation to the colonizer’s epistemological paradigm and concomitant displacement of African thought. African thought has become the thought of the excluded African other. Academic attempts to decolonize the African other thus seem to have failed, particularly among those purported to be most critical – the philosophers.

This collection can be considered as part of a much-needed philosophical response to the recurrent postcolonial call to uproot the prevalent workings of the colonial regime, with a close focus on the African context. More precisely, it is about problems of justice, the effect of injustice on the formation of the self, and strategies of resistance against injustice.

Philosophical consideration of the prevalent workings of the colonial regime gives rise to inconveniently self-critical questions of justice and identity. Can one self-identify with black Africans if one has not suffered the injustice of anti-black racism? If one has not suffered because one is black, one cannot fight racism as black people do. Biko was right. Who, then, may call themselves real Africans, and who may speak out against the othering of Africans? More personally, should a male of European ancestry like me, privileged by the state of apartheid and its systematic legal and epistemic injustice against black citizens, be the guest editor of a special issue on the injustice of othering Africans?⁶ Was I not recently on the other

side of justice? How can I speak out against othering Africans if I did not undergo the injustice of anti-black racism?

These questions reflect other, more general, questions. Who or what is “the other”? Does “the other” refer to the inner strangeness of the self, perhaps in a way that haunts it and that it repudiates by projecting it onto others? Or does it perhaps refer to the othering gaze of another person, which, internalized, produces resentment towards oneself?⁷ Or, else, does it refer to the strangeness of the other; his or her radical alterity? In what other ways is the other othered? Again, in what sense is othering an injustice, and how can justice be a concern for the otherness and othering of the other?

Some of these questions, including those concerning our relations with the other – legal, ethical, historical or psychological – have been at the forefront of past and current studies in philosophy and in other disciplines such as psychology, cultural studies, and history.⁸ The contributions in this collection address a range of questions concerning the othering of Africans in the postcolonial context, specifically by focusing on philosophical issues of justice and the self. This focus distinguishes this collection from other volumes on the other, postcoloniality and African philosophy.⁹

Not each contribution deals explicitly with both justice and the self. Some focus on problems of justice, others on issues of subjectivity. At a cursory glance, it appears that there is no obvious link between justice and the self. As the variety of contributions show, justice and the self each take on different meanings in different practical contexts. This reflects the fact that these concepts have a diversity of meanings in the history of philosophy. This variety also shows, particularly in postcolonial discourse, that we are challenged to ask critical questions concerning the prevalent legacy of dominant Western concepts and practices, questions which invite diversity in thinking. However, the problem of African othering suggests a connection between justice and the self, which seems to run through a diversity of their uses. This connection goes back to the classic definition of justice as such. According

to its classic definition, justice is the sustained quest to render to each person his or her due.¹⁰ This rather abstract notion of justice – as quest to render to each *self* its due – raises both questions of a metaphysical and legal nature with regard to just and unjust, due or undue, approaches to other selves. This link between justice and the self allows for a diversity of uses and of connections between both terms.

The contributions can be divided roughly into three broad sections – without taking them to fit neatly into or to be confined to these sections, or strictly to follow in this specific sequence. So, most broadly, the first three contributions (Okeja, Allsobrook, Lauer) deal with critical issues of justice; the second set of contributions (Lamola, Naicker, Flikschuh) address problems of the formation of the self in unjust conditions; and the last four contributions (Bernasconi, Cloete, Tabensky, Du Toit) analyse strategies against othering.

I problems of justice

Uchenna Okeja’s “Justice through Deliberation and the Problem of Otherness” considers the challenge that negative constructions of otherness pose for the pursuit of justice through deliberation. He argues that deliberation has been central to the pursuit of justice in African societies. A critical question that he raises is whether justice is realizable through deliberation, if one or more parties to deliberation regard other parties as absolute others, particularly as the “embodiment of everything abhorrent or aberrant.” He shows that in practices variously called “palaver,” public meetings or village assemblies, people endeavour to exercise justice through deliberation. This means that when parties disagree during a deliberation they may choose to go their separate ways, or they may agree to reconvene on another date. Through consideration of two models of deliberation – irenic and agonistic deliberation – he argues that the nature of any deliberation determines whether it must contend with the challenge of otherness. More generally, he argues

that deliberation as a means to justice ultimately is contingent upon intersubjective affirmation of a basic principle, namely, the principle of humanity. He concludes that the shortcoming of the deliberative model of justice consists in its inability to deal with the rejection of dialogue based on certain notions of otherness.

In “Consensual Recognition of Universal Rights in African Custom” Chris Allsobrook argues that South Africa’s Bill of Rights is informed by Eurocentric Enlightenment principles, developed at the height of slavery and colonialism, which privilege European cultural norms, judging others inferior, to justify their conquest. Africanist critics of the Eurocentrism of hegemonic universal rights argue that Africans do not share the Western concept of rights. Rights in African ethics are commonly distinguished from Western rights, according to the distinct ideas of personhood, which ground them. According to Allsobrook, this critique, from personhood, sacrifices universality for cultural specificity. He argues that universal rights are better supported by consensual rights recognition. Allsobrook shows how normative justification of rights from consensual rights recognition is consistent with deliberative ideas of justice in African ethics. Africanist criticism, of individualist bias in Eurocentric interpretations of rights, supports the contention that rights are justified *between* people, not in personhood. He concludes that consensually accredited, recognized critical norms are preferable to rules derived from personhood, for the normative justification of universal rights from African ethics.

Helen Lauer’s “Implicitly Racist Epistemology: Recent Philosophical Appeals to the Neurophysiology of Tacit Prejudice” explores why examples of mainstream philosophy of cognition and applied phenomenology demonstrate the implicit bias that they treat as their subject matter, whether or not the authors of these works intend or approve of so doing. She shows why egalitarian intuitions, which form the basis for ideal models of justice appealing to elites in racially stratified societies, provide an inadequate framework for illuminating and dismantling the mechanics of racial

discrimination. Lauer applies recently developed results in social choice theory to cases where racial bias is perpetuated through institutionally orchestrated collective decision making. She argues that the “discursive dilemma” theorem suggests why the analysis of subliminal attitudes is irrelevant to correcting the racial injustices presumed to follow from implicit bias in societies where negative racial stereotypes, ostensibly and explicitly deplored, are covertly and illicitly reinforced.

2 formations of the self

In “Breaking the Gridlock of the African Postcolonial Self-Imagination: Marx against Mbembe” M. John Lamola challenges Achille Mbembe’s analysis of the effect of colonial and neo-colonial injustice on African subjectivity in Mbembe’s book *On the Postcolony*. Mbembe declared that his book was written at a time when the study of Africa was caught in a dramatic analytical gridlock as traditional critical frameworks and discourses on the condition of postcolonial Africa seemed inadequate and ineffectual. Mbembe identifies specifically Marxian analysis of colonization as such an incapable critical framework of analysis. Lamola shows that Mbembe introduces, as an alternative to these “failed” traditional paradigms, a deconstructive experimental hermeneutic that leads him to the explication of colonial alterity in libidinal, representational and semiotically analogous language. Lamola challenges the efficacy of these post-structuralist semiotics and phenomenological extrapolations as a way out of Mbembe’s perceived “cul-de-sac” in African postcolonial “self-imagination.” Lamola turns around Mbembe’s dismissal of Marxian theory and demonstrates, on the contrary, that it is an analytical paradigm, which most radically diagnoses the injustice of colonization, and prevailing neo-colonialism, as it affects the African subject.

Veeran Naicker’s “*Ressentiment* in the Postcolony: A Nietzschean Analysis of Self and Otherness” examines the deployment of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* by three major thinkers in postcolonial theory,

namely, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Achille Mbembe. His argument is that while postcolonial theory has used *ressentiment* in a way that potentially accounts for how contemporary moral culture conditions racism, nativism and xenophobia, this deployment remains incoherent. Naicker contends that the postcolonial deployment of *ressentiment* begins with an incoherent reading of Nietzsche by Fanon, a mistake which is creatively appropriated by Said and Mbembe. In their postcolonial use of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche's insights are discarded and the term is transformed through Hegelian and psychoanalytic schematics, which take morality to be a universal and prescriptive code, the very problem that Nietzsche was attempting to overcome. Fanon, so Naicker contends, takes *ressentiment* to explain how colonial projection, or the racial gaze, is internalized by the colonized subject to produce a relation of self-hate. Said and Mbembe, so he shows, adopt the term to explain how colonial moral schemas are internalized and inverted to produce a reactive relation to the other on the basis of a good/evil moral schema. According to Naicker, the solution for all three thinkers is an overcoming of Manichean racism through inculcating a set of universal values based on reciprocal recognition. He objects that these thinkers change the meaning of the term in their postcolonial discourse; however, they still claim to be using the term as originally configured by Nietzsche. Naicker's contention is that these thinkers also fail to indicate how *ressentiment* can be overcome or lead to recognition by providing a transitional space between markedly different ontologies of natural and social life. He argues that the deployment of *ressentiment* marks neither a Nietzschean turn nor a coherent transformation for problems in the postcolony.

In "Can I Choose to be Who I am Not? On (African) Subjectivity" Katrin Flikschuh engages Abraham Olivier's recent distinction between "being" and "choosing to be" within his phenomenological approach to subjectivity in general and to African, communal subjectivity in particular. She recapitulates and problematizes aspects of Olivier's reverse phenomenological analysis, briefly contrasting

it with more orthodox African approaches to the ontology of the self. She then concentrates on the distinction between being who I am and choosing to be who I am not. Olivier argues that even if I am no African, I am still free to choose to be an African; thus, I remain free to choose who I am not. Flikschuh argues that I can indeed choose to be who I am not, subject to the proviso that I cannot choose to be who I am. She closes with some reflections on the moral significance of conscientiously choosing to be who I am not and what sense this question makes in the context of post-apartheid South Africa or a broader African context.

3 strategies against othering

Robert Bernasconi's "A Most Dangerous Error: The Boasian Myth of a Knock-Down Argument against Racism" argues that a genealogy of the English word *racism* shows that its dominant sense was shaped by Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu around 1940 to establish a broad consensus against a narrow form of antisemitism found among some anthropologists in Nazi Germany. Their strategy, so he explains, was to challenge the biological concept of race on which racism, on their account, was said to be parasitic. This strategy was subsequently adopted by UNESCO in 1950 and is still advocated by many today. However, Bernasconi contends that this strategy was not formulated to address anti-black racism and its limitations were quickly exposed by black thinkers like Oliver Cromwell Cox and Frantz Fanon. They understood that the problem was a form of systemic racism that could not be separated from the economic inequalities produced by slavery and colonialism. Bernasconi concludes that racism cannot be reduced to a system of thought open to scientific refutation; thus, the problem is misdiagnosed from the outset.

In "Steve Biko: Black Consciousness and the African Other – The Struggle for the Political" Michael Cloete argues that the legacy of Steve Biko remains to this day a "contested" legacy, not only on account of his reputation as a political activist but also because of profound scepticism regarding the philosophical status and