

BOOK FORUM

ON JEANNE-MARIE JACKSON'S *THE AFRICAN NOVEL OF IDEAS: PHILOSOPHY AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL WRITING*

## What African Philosophy Can Learn from Jeanne-Marie Jackson's *The African Novel of Ideas*

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I love the endings of books. They are often the sections that are not numbered as if they were regular chapters. I often start with them, which maybe doesn't work that well if I'm reading a mystery but can be very useful when reading academic work. These final sections are often ostensibly distillations of what a writer feels like he or she has earned in the book. They can also, though, be provocations, parting shots, armchair reflections, caveats, remainders, loose ends, or even sometimes just some version of "further study is needed." They can even, at times, tip their hand, giving us the Freudian slip that shows an author's anxieties about the argument just made. Indeed, sometimes it is where the cracks show or are admitted under the author's breath. But, as the songwriter Leonard Cohen said, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

What is the crack in Jeanne-Marie Jackson's new book, *The African Novel of Ideas*? Well, it is certainly not her core argument. The major thread of this book examines how contemporary African novels have drawn on and exemplified questions that African philosophy has taken up. More than that, reading the novels with an understanding of how philosophers do what they do enables us to see how the novelists manage to avoid overreaches of representation that fiction might be prone to, especially fiction that stands in the shadow of political and colonial brutalities of the colonial period in Africa.

It is less a crack that the epilogue makes apparent and more a remainder, what Jackson calls a "fringe" at the edges between two forms of African literature: "outward-facing (that is, seen by the West as representative but in fact not) and

locally popular (actually representative but internationally unseen) African fiction.”<sup>1</sup> This philosophical fringe is a “brand of literary expression committed to preserving a space of intellectualism for its own sake, not as a turn away from the political exigencies of the continent, but in the desperate, dogged hope that a space *might* remain there for seeing the world in a way that we have not yet” (188). Jackson’s version of the crack, between literature that the West would recognize and local literature, allows a light to shine in that it enables us to see a world in a way we have not yet. This is a compelling argument for nature and a role literature in Africa can have (and indeed, literature elsewhere as well).

What’s particularly interesting for me, though, are the implications of all this for philosophy. When she hopes for a space in which we might see a world that is not yet, I read her as hoping for becoming-world, that is, the non-representational moment of creation. This is something we might intuitively expect to see in literature, at least inasmuch as the created worlds of fiction might be judged not just by how faithful they are to a “real” world, whatever that means, but by what they might open up. This form of literature becomes Deleuze and Guattari’s “minoritarian literature,”<sup>2</sup> showing a line of flight from the comfortable (if disturbing) confirmation of what we recognize to the uncanny valley where the familiar becomes uncomfortable because it is becoming something new.

So, becoming-world makes sense in literature. What fascinates me is its potentiality in philosophy. And I think Jackson gives us some direction here as well in the concepts she evokes throughout the book. She builds her case using these concepts to arrive at what I am calling becoming-world, but they could equally be seen as building the same thing within African philosophy, something that rarely if ever happens.

Much of my own work in African philosophy has been directed at overcoming what I think of as a representationalist obsession that has existed in academic African philosophy for a long time. Sometimes the representationalism has been overt—the call has been to produce a philosophy (understood as a system, a set of concepts, or a position on a question) that is both properly philosophical and properly African. Like most philosophy, it has regarded concepts as representations of reality. It prioritizes description over creation, the past over the future, the abstract over the lived, and the proposition over the question. Once a philosophy has been found and explicated that adequately checks the boxes of really being philosophy and really being African, we think we have African philosophy, and this stands as an answer to the dismissive Western traditions that have believed Africa is not capable of having a philosophy.

My own alternative to this picture has been what I call “philosophy-in-place,” which begins with a rejection of the central question that animates the representationalism just described: “Is there an African philosophy?” Instead, I argue for a better question, one that has the potential to matter in Africa itself: “What is it to do philosophy in this (African) place?”

<sup>1</sup> Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

Many details need to be worked out in order to address that question, but its point is to move away from a version of philosophy that is primarily retrospective, primarily individualistic, primarily descriptive at least in its foundation, and prone to introduce normative questions against a backdrop of colonial violence.

As I say, there are concepts that appear in the introduction and each of the four main chapters of this book. The ones that I would like to survey, with a view to seeing how literature might inform philosophy, are as follows. In the introduction, Jackson uses the concept of individualism. In Chapter 1, it is concepts, and in Chapter 2 civility. Chapter 3 takes up the question of reason (and rationality), and finally, Chapter 4 raises the question of death, and connected to that, the idea of solitude. With these concepts, we can see a path to a revision of African philosophy that is non-representational and has an eye to becoming-world.

The first surprise I saw in Jackson's book was her defense of individualism and liberalism. It was a surprise for several reasons. First, I usually think of novelists as the writers of individual experience and philosophers as those too quickly willing to move past the individual to universals. What could philosophers possibly have to say to novelists about individualism? Second, individualism has been long tainted by ties to dualism, capitalism, and rationalism of the sort that models the Enlightenment property-owning male as the true exemplar of reason and the proper architect of society.

This is not, of course, what Jackson has in mind. Her version of the individual "breaks away from seeing the cohesive, systematically reflecting individual as the fulfillment of civilizational exclusivity. Instead, it suggests the novelized philosopher as the threshold of world-expanding abstraction" (6–7). The individualism Jackson has in mind is an individualism earned, not presumed. It is the location of imagination, and something more than that, a creativity that becomes possible because of an individual's engagement with the forces in their world, but not predictable. This individual is not the titan of industry or the smartest person in the room. She or he is, rather, a point of emergence, a location for making manifest a set of potentialities latent in the place at hand. Philosophy, then, is not a set of principles that an individual can wield in order to control the world (at an abstract if not a material level), but the reflective ability of the individual to describe the emergences, abstract them without losing their debts and duties to their places, and scaffold a world in which the salient features are preserved.

Jackson is right to see this kind of individual at the core of African experience, in literature and in culture. The facile distinction between Western individualism and African collectivism elides far too many questions, and what we have here is an individualism on far firmer ground. It is also an individualism that allows a different kind of philosophical question—not "What must we believe in order to be African?" but "What is the place and what are the resources an individual has within Africa to define a line of flight, true to Africa but also new?"

The subtitle of Chapter 1 picks up on this kind of individual—it is "the case for a liberated solitude." So, what does this solitary individual, the one who can give us the becoming-world, look like? It is, among other things, the individual who can work with concepts.

It is this point where I would likely diverge the most from Jackson. Her use of concepts in this place is to provide a reliable basis for comparison. It suggests

that they are along the lines of the classical definition of concepts, which are abstract representations and contents of the mind. There is, to be sure, an element of truth to this depiction, but it also seems partial and prone to put the individual back in the role of the master of these concepts, the owner of a full suite of coherent and interlocking concepts that can then be defended and form the basis of our epistemology. Although it is true that they sometimes present themselves in this manner, the idea that concepts are intellectual atoms, available to everyone (which is why they resist relativism) and able to be compared (which is why we can tell better from worse ones) seems to me to take a slice out of the life of a concept and elevate that slice to its entire identity.

If we have the kind of individual that Jackson imagines here, I think we need a different kind of concept as well. A concept might just as well be created as it is found, and, indeed, its creation might happen in advance of the language that contains it. We might, for instance, see a range of new concepts created under the heading of “race,” for instance, or “freedom,” or any of the other abstractions that philosophers use. There are times when language runs ahead of the concept (as is often the case in poetry, for instance) and other times when concepts run ahead of language.

A shift in our sense of concepts brings with it a shift in what we think concepts can do. Jackson’s book is one in comparative literature, and comparison is indeed one thing we can do with concepts. It is not the only thing, though. Concepts might also mutate and evolve. They might summarize other concepts at a greater level of abstraction. They might, when compared, suggest a deeper or more profound concept that contains them both, or they might exist in a dialectical relationship that renders them *passé*, or they might simply exist as oil and water, mutually exclusive but both necessary.

The point is, if we have an individual who is the moment of becoming-world, what does that becoming-world consist in? It may be that it consists in the concepts overwhelming the individuals themselves, rather than just being mental representations. Individuals might not be the masters of these concepts at all, but they are also not their subjects.

In the end, Jackson ends up close to this position anyway. By the end of her section on concepts (48), we can see that the point of comparison is, among other things, decolonization, which means moving (as she sees in Ato Quayson’s work) from “*living* comparatively to *doing* comparison” (48). She may well intend the “*doing*” of comparison to refer to an abstract mental operation; I think it is every bit as likely to be the production of new concepts that come out of the imperative to live in a place, honoring existing concepts while not being determined by them, honoring forms of life that not only already exist but are yet to be. Living and doing are not, in other words, incompatible moments.

In Chapter 2, Jackson asks the question of how the individual can and should proceed. The answer, following Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange in *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism*, is that one should proceed with civility.<sup>3</sup> *Civility*

<sup>3</sup> Stanlake Samkange with Tommie Marie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Salisbury, England, and Harare, Zimbabwe: Graham Publishers, 1980).

is, of course, a deeply fraught term, and Jackson outlines all the ways that it is problematic on the road to the recovery of a different version of civility. But she sees something else in Samkange and Samkange's appeal to civility. She sees it not as a reinforcement of existing power structures, but as a "move away from historical experience and toward cultural-cum-moral systematization" (79). This systematization is not one that I see as similar to the great philosophical systems, but rather the recognition that the moral universe, like all other aspects of the universe, operates as interdependent networks rooted in its places, not as abstract ideals to be imposed on those places. This makes it no less moral (that is, the recognition that morality resides rather than presides). In fact, as Jackson puts it, "It holds open a proverbial space for values that are squeezed out of the world as it is, charging philosophy with the work to which Samkange finds the novel no longer suited" (79).

Far from seeing civility as only making nice, simply allowing real points of conflict and principle to be elided in favor of social calmness, this version of civility reaches for values adequate to a world as it is. This means opposition to colonial structures, to power structures that would impose a false calm through power. It is worth remembering that the linguistic roots of "civility" refer to good citizenship, and in fact one might be a good citizen precisely by standing for other citizens. The meaning of "politeness" came about later, just as being a good citizen came to mean being an obedient and nondisruptive one.

If civility is a recognition of moral systematization, we are led to the question of how we might reason about these things. Samkange's representational mode is "*individualized* but not *subjectivized*" (96), which means that civility is not simply the expression of an inner moral sense.<sup>4</sup> It is, instead, a system, and it can be reasoned about. This is what we find in Chapter 3—the question of how reason and rationality operate and are related to each other. Emmanuel Eze's final book, *On Reason*, provides the foundation to think through the next step in the argument.<sup>5</sup> Eze moves reason from being the subject of a cultural and indeed racialized vocabulary, which assumes that Europeans have it and it is up to everyone else to demonstrate that they do as well.

Eze's alternative is a version of rationality that assembles our many strategies of reason into a workable model that might differ in different places, but the activity of which nevertheless is what we call rationality. He identifies forms of reason not as the European Enlightenment did, privileging white and Western forms of reason over all others, but in more prosaic terms: calculative reason, formal reason, hermeneutical reason, empirical reason, phenomenological reason, and, for him most importantly, ordinary reason. Everyone has these forms of reason, but they are assembled and deployed differently for a wide range of reasons. It is rationality that does this assembly.

Jackson makes the case that this model can be seen in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel *Kintu*, among other places. The model is one that "privileges how one gets to truth over pinning truth down, inverting and subverting

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*; italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Eze, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2008).

received knowledge as needed to make the act of reasoning live up to its tarnished name” (122). Makumbi’s exemplification of this is an illustration of a “reasonable individuation” that lets us see how philosophy can develop from the ground up, as it were.

The fourth chapter, finally, discusses philosophical suicide. If individualism is the goal, suicide is the most individual act one can imagine. More than that, though—it is a creative act, an act (in literature at least) that has the potential to create a world. The philosophical suicide is the shift in balance “away from an individual’s being in social space and back toward his thinking in a private one” (156). It is the shift away from thinking that philosophy in Africa is about capturing (that is, representing) what it means to be African and toward seeing solitary thought itself as the act of being in Africa, wherever it might lead. This suicide is the liberated solitude in the subtitle of the first chapter—solitude because the writer (whether novelist or philosopher) is no longer obligated to represent the collective group as a condition of being African and liberated because the writer can now create as an individual, out of the African past but not necessitated by it.

This has been a reconstructed path through Jackson’s book, one that moves the discussion to focus on how philosophy might proceed, rather than on what literature might be able to use from philosophy. Jackson’s goal in all of this has been to identify a groundswell in recent African literature and suggest a future. In so doing she has, whether she intended to or not, also charted a path for African philosophy if philosophers are willing to engage it. She has shown that, just as African novels operate in a mode of becoming-world, so too does (or could) philosophy. There is far more detail in her book than could go into this brief reconstruction, but I hope the idea is clear. Just because she has used elements of African philosophy to illuminate what is already happening within some recent African novels, it does not mean that philosophy itself could not learn from this mode of individual thinking, which is oriented toward creation, toward becoming-world.

This is, in other words, not just an important book for African literature or comparative literature. This should be an important book for African philosophy as well. I hope philosophers can see it in those terms.

**Author biography.** Bruce Janz is a professor of philosophy and the codirector of the Center for Humanities and Digital Research (CHDR) at the University of Central Florida. His publications include *Philosophy in an African Place*, *A Neurophenomenology of Awe and Wonder: Towards a Non-Reductionist Cognitive Science, Place, Space, and Hermeneutics*, and *African Philosophy and Enactivist Cognition: The Space of Thought*. (Email: [bruce.janz@ucf.edu](mailto:bruce.janz@ucf.edu))

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