Memoirs of a Black (Male) South African Philosopher

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Mabogo Percy More. *Looking Through Philosophy in Black*. London: Roman & Littlefield International, 2019, pp. 283, USD 122. ISBN: 978-1-78660-939-7.

To practice philosophy is to be part of a conversation, and this autobiography is a conversation about Mabogo Percy More's experiences as a black African philosopher in South Africa. Not only is this a conversation about philosophy, but it is also a conversation with philosophy as a profession, its interlocutors, and the philosophical canon (i.e., its concepts, methodology, manuscripts). Moreover, it is an account of the philosophers both living (such as Lewis Gordon, Charles W. Mills, and Tendayi Sithole) and dead (such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Steve Bantu Biko, and William E. B. DuBois) who have informed More's worldview, matched with his lived experience. More specifically, as he himself says, this is "an autobiography of a black philosopher in apartheid and (post)apartheid South Africa and its academic institutions" (vii).

Key words: black philosophy; African philosophy; existentialism; critical philosophy of race

Mabogo Percy More is a retired South African philosopher who has served as a professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Limpopo, South Africa. In writing this philosophical memoir, More details what it is like to exist in anti-black philosophical spaces as a black person during and "post" apartheid South Africa. He is also the author of *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation* and has written extensively on African existentialism. This memoir is a continuation of his scholarly work. The title of the autobiography captures the intentions of the memoir: in reading these reflections, the non-black audience is given a glimpse of what it is like for the black person to be in philosophy, embodied as a black person and possessing a different epistemology. Simply put, More's memoir is about the negotiations that black scholars have to make in order to "survive" in the academy. *Looking Through Philosophy in Black* is More's reflection on how "black philosophers *qua* black people do not escape the viciousness of racism in their lives" (116) and that when they do, as he has arguably done, "one has to pay [the] price for trying to 'tell it like it is'" (125). The "price" More had to pay was facing forced retirement and lack of recognition from his own community, as we learn in chapter eight, "Post 'Retirement." More details how his philosophical abilities have been undermined because of the kind of philosophy that he writes, in which he exposes the racist nature of the discipline of philosophy. The last three chapters of the book include a sample of his academic work, including the essay that won him the 2015 Frantz Fanon Lifetime Achievement Award entitled "Locating Frantz Fanon in Postapartheid South Africa."

Although he spent his professional teaching career in the South African academy, the experiences he retells in the book are also from his visits abroad in the United States of America. In chapter four, "Overseas Experiences," More provides an account of his experience with racism outside of South Africa, therefore suggesting that racism is a global phenomenon. This is to show how "[r]acism […] is a global problem peculiar to not only Africa alone but also the United States and European countries" (111). For example, when More was a visiting scholar at

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Indiana University (January 1980), at the time "there were no other black students or faculty in philosophy" (77) except for a Ugandan student, Kibujjo Kalumba.

One of the things that I appreciated about this book is that More makes it very clear who he thinks this book is intended for. According to him, his audience is not the "universal man" who is removed from their conditions of existence; rather it is intended for those who find themselves in similar conditions that he has faced, "not just as a philosopher but fundamentally as a black philosopher" (ix) who finds themselves in not only a white-dominated world but one that is also anti-black. In the book, More mentions the rich philosophical archive of the existential philosophy that has informed his life. More wants readers to understand his life by knowing what he read. Throughout the book, the number of citations and brief discussion of thinkers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Steve Bantu Biko, Thabo Mbeki, Frantz Fanon, G. W. F. Hegel, Chabani Noel Manganyi, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Lewis Gordon are instructive regarding what inspired More. His interest in existential philosophy played a major role in how he saw philosophy as a part of human life.

More therefore has the goal of humanizing philosophy. In the opening paragraphs of *Looking Through Philosophy in Black*, More argues that "most philosophers are human beings before they become philosophers or remain human beings while being philosophers" (vii). Therefore, this book should be read as an attempt to humanize philosophy; the very first chapter of the book, "By Way of Freedom," gets to this. The reader learns that "philosopher" is not the only personal identity that More holds; rather he chooses to navigate the world as a "bachelor or a professor or a bachelor professor or whatever" (5). The ability to make choices about which narratives to add and how to tell them seems very important to the author—choice becomes a way of bringing "back the humanity of black philosophers" (17) that can be lost in an anti-black world. Likewise, in the effort to humanize the discipline of philosophy, I will take the liberty to insert my personal narrative into this review. As a 26-year-old black female South African philosopher, the word "gratitude" is not enough to explain how appreciative I am of this book. Even though I am currently located in the US academy, where I am pursuing my PhD in philosophy, all of my education up to my master's degree was received in South Africa. I have also started my teaching career there as a lecturer. Therefore, I have interacted with the South African academy both as a student and as a professional philosopher. My age is of importance; the philosophical academy that I interacted with is that of "post" apartheid South Africa, which despite the history of racial reconciliation is still an academy that remains as white as it did during apartheid. Reading this book felt like having a conversation with one's grandfather on a Sunday afternoon while listening to soul music. More answered many questions that I had, questions that only someone with an experience like More's could answer, given that there are very few black African philosophers in South Africa. During my undergraduate years at the University of Johannesburg, not once was I taught by a black philosophy professor. It never made sense to me why black people were either tutors or adjuncts. In the second chapter of the book, entitled "Formative Years," More explains that the lack of black philosophers in lectureship positions is not due to the fact that black people were not capable of doing philosophy, of course. Rather, the lack of black philosophers in South Africa could be attributed to the system which hindered their entrance and professional progression. For instance, Tintswalo George Mashamba was a staff member at the Turfloop (the University of the North at the time) where More did his undergraduate degree. Mashamba was working on his master's thesis but would not see the completion of the project as he was "arrested for his political involvement with the ANC (African National Congress) and sentenced to ten years on Robben Island" (34). According to More, F. J. Engelbrecht (an Afrikaner), who was also a staff member in the department, played a hand in the arrest of Mashamba. This is just one of many narratives that show how people in the discipline have been complicit in not only maintaining racism within the profession but also in the broader society.

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It is in the third chapter of More's book, "Philosophy Lecturer," that one learns more about how philosophy was used to defend apartheid. In this chapter, readers are informed about the Afrikaner philosophers who not only "explicitly defended apartheid" (62), but also later ensured that their philosophical arguments regarding apartheid were put into practice. One example is Nico Diederichs, who was once the chair of political philosophy at the University of the Free State during apartheid South Africa and would later become the Minister of Finance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Another example is R. F. A Hoernle, who wrote *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit* (1939), a book which More explains very much "resembles in a significant manner later apartheid legislation such as the Group Areas Act, Separate Amenities Act, Mixed Marriage Acts, and so on, [that] provided arguments for the Nationalist Party apartheid policy" (63). (These were acts that assigned racial groups to which areas they could work and live in, including the segregation of public amenities and the prohibition of marriage across racial groups.) More thus offers these examples as a reflection on the fact that canonical philosophers of the past are also not innocent, since "behind the laws was a pseudo-philosophical theory of racial identity that claimed to find its philosophical justification in the phenomenological school of thought made popular by German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger" (62).

The one question that the book failed to answer was the gender question. As a black woman, I take issue with this. I do not think that it is an oversight. It is very clear in the language that More uses that "black" assumes a male identity. The "black" in question is not the black woman; rather, it is the black man. An intersectional analysis of gender would have benefited this book. More fails to reflect on the gender positionality that affords him the capital to enter philosophy spaces. In the few moments when he does speak about gender, it is represented as "triple jeopardy." According to him, "it would be a triply heavy (triple jeopardy) if [one was] black, a woman, and a philosopher" (9). Not once does the author mention any black African female colleagues that he may have interacted with. Even if there were none, I think that it would have been beneficial for both him and the female African reader who is to pick up this book if he had been explicit about this. I waited in anticipation for him to acknowledge Mpho Tshivhase[1] (the first black African, South African woman to get a PhD in philosophy), but it seems like this milestone was not worthy of mention. In fact, in an interview with Rosemere Ferreira Da Siva (2020),[2] More acknowledges this missed opportunity to engage with the gender question and philosophy. He writes: "one of the most important worrying issues I did not seriously confront in the text is the question of Black women philosophers in my country South Africa" (More 2020). It is in this interview that More further explains the deep regret for not providing "enough encouragement, incentive, and exemplary attitude to draw Black women into the discipline from underaged to graduate programs" (More 2020). Even though More attempts to redeem himself in this blog, this redemption is not satisfactory. Instead, it treats the "gender" question as an afterthought, as a matter that is only important for interviews or blogs and not worthy to be included in books.

Overall, *Looking Through Philosophy in Black* reads as an ode, an ode to the black bodies that wish to continue with their careers in philosophy. It also leaves one with further thoughts. Had More played or bought into the politics of respectability where would he be right now, and would this autobiography be what it is? For example, he argues that "[w]ithin the context of racist hegemony such as in South Africa, any black person who says, writes, or does something that upsets whites runs the risk of being put in his or her place. Blacks who utter *beyond the pale* remarks about white racism are never forgiven, nor are their statements or remarks forgotten" (127). It goes without saying that the book would not have been what it is. As to what More means by these remarks is unclear and is open to the readers interpretation. What is clear, however, is that one is unlikely to get a satisfactory answer from him. Instead, he passes the baton over to my generation.

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1 In 2018 Mpho Tshivhase became the first black African woman to attain a PhD in philosophy. There was much debate about her being the first "black" woman since "black" in South Africa can include people who are Coloured, Indian, and African. Zinhle Mncube and I co-wrote an op-ed that attests to the need for the designator black-African even though it does seem like a tautology. See: Nompumelelo Zinhle Manzini, and Zinhle Mncube, "Identity by Race Does Matter," Mail&Guardian, 2018. (https://mg.co.za/article/2018-05-25-00-identity-by-race-does-matter/; last accessed: on 25 January, 2020).

2 Rosemere Ferreira da Silva, "Interview with Mabogo P. More," Blog of the APA, (https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/01/21/interview-with-mabogo-more/; last accessed: 25 January 2020.

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