

Black Women in the History of Philosophy – Methodological Considerations

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Abstract

Worldwide, pre-nineteenth-century philosophical works by women are almost entirely undocumented – particularly with respect to the African continent. However, this fact has so far caused little concern to the vast majority of authors. Due to a predominantly masculine perspective in the discipline, the exclusion of women from the canon of the history of philosophy continues to this day. This also applies to attempts to reconstruct the history of African philosophy. Reconstructing the lives and works of Black women philosophers in Africa and the African diaspora is particularly difficult because there are few surviving pre-nineteenth-century philosophical texts written by women. Furthermore, philosophy in oral traditions – and the role of women therein – raises difficult methodological questions. A contemporary revision of the canon of the history of philosophy, however, cannot take place solely from an intercultural or global perspective; it must also address and correct patriarchal structures of exclusion in all regions of the world. The paper discusses the specific challenges of reconstructing the history of Black women philosophers in oral as well as in written traditions, in the latter case, with the help of two examples: Walatta Petros and Phillis Wheatley.

Keywords: African Philosophy, Global History of Philosophy, Feminist Philosophy, Black Feminism

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Introduction: The Problem

Until today it can be said that little attention has been paid to the contribution of women to philosophy and its history, and the absence of women philosophers in departments, the curriculum, and survey works is rarely perceived as a shortcoming. Moreover, prejudices that assume that women are either incapable of doing philosophy or only capable of doing it to a very limited extent, and that their achievements in the discipline are mediocre at best, have been widespread until recent times.¹

This problem also affects the field of historiography of philosophy as such. In recent decades great effort has been exerted worldwide in intercultural philosophy and such similar disciplines as transcultural, comparative and global philosophy, to bring to light historical and contemporary philosophical traditions excluded from the dominant discourse and include marginalised voices in an equal, non-hierarchical, nonviolent, open discourse. However, little has been done to include women philosophers in this discourse. The programme of making philosophical traditions from all regions of the world visible in academic discourse and integrating them into teaching and research on an equal footing, thus contributing to epistemic justice in the global philosophical discourse, has thus far not extended to women philosophers' works in those traditions. On the contrary, the same gender bias that we are already familiar with from European and North American philosophy pervades intercultural philosophising and regional as well as global histories of philosophy to a large extent. For example, a brief examination of publications in German and English from the 1980s to the 2000s shows that, with very few exceptions,² women philosophers are not included in reconstructed histories of philosophy in the Islamic world, India, and

¹ Ruth Hagengruber and Karen Green provide an illustrative example in their introduction to the special issue of *The Monist*, 'The History of Women's Ideas'. Here they refer to a 1993 article by David Stove, in which Stove argues that the lack of significant contributions to philosophy by women provides sufficient evidence for women's inferior intellectual capacity. He also claims: 'There is not a single passage, intended for publication, in any philosopher that I know of, in which the intellectual equality of the two sexes is asserted.' Stove, *The Subjection of John Stuart Mill*, 5.

² An example in German language is: Kralle and Schilling, eds., *Schreiben über Frauen in China* (Writing about Women in China). However, this book is less about women philosophers and more about women's writing and writing about women. Very progressive in this respect is Peter Adamson's podcast *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*: For example for India, see Adamson & Ganeri, 'Better Half: Women in Ancient India', episode 16, <https://historyofphilosophy.net/women-india> (accessed 02.08.2022).

China.³ The same applies to reconstructions of South American⁴ and African philosophies. In the case of Africa, there is at least a development: while Masolo mentions no women in his book on the history of African philosophy in the 20th century, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1994), Barry Hallen mentions the gender question and some representatives of feminist philosophy in Chapter 8 of his book *A Short History of African Philosophy* (2009). And Peter Adamson's podcast *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* has produced episodes on Africana philosophy portraying numerous Black women philosophers, however with a focus on the African diaspora in North America.⁵ Nevertheless, we are still essentially at the beginning, with a research gap unaddressed by intercultural philosophy, feminist and gender studies, and regional and global histories of philosophy. So who will tell the story of Black women philosophers?

Only recently has there been an awareness that women philosophers in 'non-Western'⁶ traditions constitute a doubly marginalised group, hitherto invisible in regional and intercultural discourse, and barely perceived even in feminist historiography of philosophy. There are – fortunately – a few exceptions, such as Raúl Fornet-Betancourt's book (published 2008 in German) *Frauen und Philosophie im lateinamerikanischen Denken* (Women and Philosophy in Latin American Thought). However, it is primarily thanks to the tireless interventions of contemporary women philosophers that women's contributions to philosophical traditions are slowly becoming the focus of research.⁷

Nevertheless, research on the philosophical work of women outside Europe and North America is still a great rarity facing entrenched prejudices. Assertions that

³ Regarding China, this concerns such classics as Feng Youlan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948), as well as recent books. For the German-speaking context, see among others: Moritz, *Die Philosophie im alten China*; Bauer, *Geschichte der chinesischen Philosophie. Konfuzianismus, Daoismus, Buddhismus*; Schleichert/ Roetz, *Klassische chinesische Philosophie*; and Heubel, *Chinesische Gegenwartsphilosophie zur Einführung*. In the field of Islamic philosophy, see Rudolph, *Islamische Philosophie*; Turki, *Einführung in die arabisch-islamische Philosophie*; and Hendrich, *Arabisch-Islamische Philosophie*. And on Indian philosophy Lorenz, *Indische Denker*. In English the situation is not much better. For further information see the bibliographical collection of histories of philosophy in different languages of the Reinhart Koselleck-project at the University of Hildesheim: <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/en/histories-of-philosophy/histories-of-philosophy/> (accessed 02.08.2022).

⁴ For Latin America see Krumpel, *Philosophie in Lateinamerika*.

⁵ See <https://historyofphilosophy.net/series/africana-philosophy> (accessed 02.08.2022).

⁶ For lack of a better term to describe philosophical traditions that have so far been excluded from the dominant philosophical discourse, I have decided to use the problematic term 'non-Western' in this essay. I use this term to refer to philosophical traditions in Africa, Asia and South America, but also to hitherto suppressed philosophical traditions such as those of the First Nations people in America, of the Maori in New Zealand, etc.

⁷ See, among others, the research project *Extending New Narratives/Pour de Nouveaux récits en histoire de la philosophie* led by Lisa Shapiro and others. <https://www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net> (accessed 02.08.2022).

equate women's lack of visibility with inability show clear parallels to arguments that have long been used to legitimise exclusion of or ignorance about 'non-Western' philosophical traditions. Because women's contributions are invisible, it is assumed that there are none, and that, therefore, women must be incapable of contributing. No other reason for the invisibility is sought or posited. If causes are named, they are located in the biological constitution of the individual or in climatic conditions, but not in underlying social, political or epistemic structures. Underlying both forms of prejudice is a lack of interest in excluded traditions of philosophising. Moreover, such prejudices often go hand in hand with a patronising attitude that only credits a narrowly defined group of people with the ability to philosophise. In doing so, the marginalised and fragmented state that results from structural patriarchal and colonial oppression and targeted destruction of such knowledge traditions is presumed to be the cause of their invisibility.

In the early 1990s American philosopher Sandra Harding pointed to the overlapping mechanisms and arguments that exclude entire regions and groups of people from both the history of philosophy and contemporary discourse (Harding 1991).⁸ She argued that analyses of such overlapping structures of discrimination require an intersectional approach that studies the intertwining of mechanisms of oppression and exclusion and the multidimensionality of subject positions. Unfortunately, for a long time her insights had hardly any impact on research methodology; particularly in philosophy they have played no role. And although Elizabeth Spelman criticised the "white, bourgeois orientation" of feminist theory as early as 1988, feminist historiography of philosophy has so far hardly succeeded in linking the feminist perspective with a larger inclusive and emancipatory agenda; at best, insufficient efforts have been made to do so. The fact that philosophy and the historiography of philosophy, area studies (such as Indology, Sinology, African studies, etc.) and gender theory have long been pursued side by side without contact has certainly contributed to this. Thus, the task that philosophical research—including intercultural philosophy—faces today is to establish an intersectional approach as an important methodological tool. The intersecting exclusions of 'non-Western' women from the predominant, the feminist, and regional historiographies of philosophy clearly point to the fact that previous research lacks awareness that thought traditions may be discriminated against in multiple ways. An intersectional approach raises precisely this awareness and enables an interweaving of feminist, anti-racist and global perspectives as well as closer interdisciplinary cooperation.

⁸ In this context see also Narayan 2000.

Challenges in Reconstructing the History of Black Women Philosophers

Reconstructing the history of women philosophers faces considerable challenges. As research into the reconstruction of the history of women philosophers in Europe and North America has already shown, there are a number of specific problems and tasks that need to be undertaken.⁹ Let me mention some of the most important here:

- Overcoming a tradition of thought/worldview that a priori denies that women have the intellectual ability to philosophise.
- Overcoming traditions and schools of philosophy in which basic philosophical concepts, such as reason, rationality or objectivity, connote masculinity.
- Investigating the structural causes that have led to the exclusion of women philosophers and their works from the canon of the discipline.
- The study of structural causes that have prevented women from engaging in intellectual activities.
- The elaboration of methods and the identification of sources for the reconstruction of the knowledge of women philosophers, for example, by conducting basic research to find philosophical works by women and reconstruct the lives and works of women philosophers.

In my opinion, discussions that have taken place within the tradition of European-North American feminist philosophical historiography can be fruitfully used for a reconstruction of the work of 'non-Western' women philosophers (including Black women philosophers), even if other contexts pose specific problems of their own. Commonalities across cultures make such use possible and reasonable. For example, the same combination of misogynistic ideology with structural and institutional discrimination against women is found in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Islamic world. Of course, the results of 'Western' women's studies cannot be transferred to all other regions of the world without further research due to the specific historical conditions in each case. Beside differences in the cultural or religious context, European and *white* North American feminist historians of philosophy do not speak from a colonised situation, with experiences of the related oppression and ruptures in traditions of the history of ideas. Colonialism and slavery as philosophical problems have only recently been addressed in feminist historiography of philosophy, as has the

⁹ See Witt/ Shapiro 2015, *Feminist History of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/feminism-femhist/> (accessed 19.04.2022); Tuana 1992; Alanen/ Witt 2004.

question of the extent to which European and *white* North American women philosophers have taken a critical stance against colonialism and slavery – or not. These historical events and their consequences, which continue to have an impact today, are central to the reconstruction of histories of philosophy in a number of ‘non-Western’ contexts.

Philosophical traditions in all regions of the world must be confronted with the question of why few or no women appear in their historical narratives. The specific factors responsible for the exclusion of women must be investigated in detail for each context. The extent to which basic terms and concepts of philosophical traditions have been shaped by a male perspective and misogyny and the extent to which gender roles have limited women’s intellectual activities must be examined. To my knowledge, such an investigation has not yet been undertaken in relation to ‘non-Western’ philosophical traditions; in the European context this has been done to some extent, but not yet sufficiently. There is also a need to examine what institutional and structural conditions have led to the exclusion of women from the narratives of philosophical traditions, and what theories and arguments have been used to legitimise this exclusion. Empirical studies in different contexts can also open up new perspectives on the mechanisms of exclusion in Europe.

The development of methods and the discovery of new sources for reconstructing the ideas of women philosophers are other important aspects that link research in all regions of the world with European-North American feminist historiography of philosophy. However, methodological challenges in regions such as Africa go beyond the state of discourse in European-North American feminist historiography of philosophy. It is striking that published European and North American histories of women philosophers show an extensive attachment to written texts. Although the theories and names of women philosophers of Greek antiquity, for whom there are no extant texts and whose names are handed down in the works of later philosophers, are usually included in narratives of the history of philosophy, only women who have left texts are included in accounts of later centuries. A text-centred approach seems to predominate. It is therefore not surprising that most detailed studies in recent years have concentrated on the period from the sixteenth century onwards, where texts written by women in a wide variety of genres are available. The discipline of the historiography of philosophy has hardly opened up to the study of non-written sources, materials and practices. This particular challenge is even more relevant for research into the reconstruction of the history of women philosophers outside Europe, especially where oral traditions have predominated. At this point, the European-North American feminist historiography of philosophy is of no help.

At this point, however, we can draw on the richness of Black feminist theory, which early on drew attention to other ways of expressing and communicating knowledge beyond the (academic) text. (Hill Collins 1991; Walker 1983).

Reconstructing the history of a philosophy based on oral traditions is difficult to begin with; how can women's philosophical knowledge be recovered in such a context? It seems an almost hopeless endeavour; authorship of oral philosophies is mostly unknown, and traditions with gender-neutral languages present further complications. For example, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's study on the Yoruba language in *The Invention of Women* (1997) shows that there are no gender-specific words in Yoruba to designate son or daughter; rather, gender-neutral terms such as 'offspring' and 'siblings' are used. Yoruba names are not gender-specific, nor are the *oko* and *aya*, often translated as 'husband' and 'wife' (Oyèwùmí 1997: 29, 44ff.). Likewise, the concept of 'women' in the sense of a social group with shared interests and a common social position, namely subordinate to men, did not exist in this community before contact with Europe. Oyèwùmí argues, "The creation of 'women' as a category was one of the first accomplishments of the colonial state." (Oyèwùmí 1997: 124)

Despite such difficulties, there are narrative traditions, as well as religious or cultural practices, that were passed on only matrilineally or in female peer groups, and thus perhaps there is also philosophising that is practised only by women. This could possibly be a starting point for reconstructing knowledge specifically transmitted by women in oral traditions, which could be examined for its philosophical relevance.¹⁰ This is an unusual and, moreover, tentatively explored approach to reconstructing philosophical knowledge, and its outcome is uncertain. Nevertheless, not only African historiography of philosophy, but also feminist, European, and North American historiographies of philosophy can benefit immediately from discussions about oral philosophy, for example by expanding source materials. In North America, this question particularly concerns the reconstruction of the philosophical knowledge of First Nations people and Black women.

From a feminist perspective, the reconstruction of the philosophical heritage in oral traditions entails a number of new challenges that have hardly been consid-

¹⁰ For example, a wide-ranging discourse has developed on the specific knowledge of Maori women (Matauranga Wahine). Cf. among others Jenkins/ Pihama 2001; Jahnke 1997. The philosophical relevance needs to be investigated.

ered so far.¹¹ But even in cases where written material exists, the reconstruction of female philosophers' concepts poses challenges, since here we are confronted with text genres that are not usually considered 'legitimate' sources in the prevailing discourse of the historiography of philosophy, such as poems and other literary forms, religious texts, hagiographies, and letters. For example, in the *Upanishads* we find the names of those women who are now considered to be the two most ancient Indian female philosophers: Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi.¹² Both are mentioned in the 6th and 8th Brahmana of the third chapter of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* as dialogue partners of the sage Yajnavalkya. Gargi is considered in Vedic literature as a great philosopher of nature and a *Brahmavadini*, a person who has great knowledge of *Brahma Vidya*. Maitreyi, a wife of Yajnavalkya, is also considered a *Brahmavadini* and participates in the dialogue. Even if it is difficult to prove whether the figures from the *Upanishads* are historical persons - a significant question for the history of philosophy - they are today predominantly regarded as historical persons and not as mythical figures.

Also in the Islamic world, there is little documentation of the work of women philosophers, especially from early centuries. Among the names of women thinkers which have come down to us are Rābi'a al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya, also known as Rābi'a of Basra (713/717–811); Fāṭima bint al-Maṭannā, also known as Fāṭima of Cordoba (12th century), a Sufi master and teacher of the renowned philosopher Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240); and 'Āiša bint Yūsuf al-Bā'uniyya (ca. 1517), who is also known as a Sufi master and poet. The Islamic tradition of the African continent, in particular the regions south of the Sahara, also has hardly any known writings by or traditions of scholarly women. In this respect, it is a fortunate coincidence that we have a few texts by Nana Asma'u (1793–1864) from the Sokoto Caliphate (in the north of present-day Nigeria), mostly religious doctrinal poems.¹³

I would now like to explain the specific challenges for reconstructing female philosophers' concepts here with the help of the example of two Black women scholars.

¹¹ An exception is the Sage Philosophy Project initiated by Henry Odera Oruka in Kenya in 1974, in which sages, including women, were interviewed (see Odera Oruka 1990). In this context, the American philosopher Gail Presbey is particularly committed to the inclusion of women. She documents and analyses the knowledge of wise women within the framework of the Sage Philosophy Project (Presbey 1997, 2000, and 2001).

¹² See for example the chapters on Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi in Waithe/ Dykemann 2023, 53–73, 74–88.

¹³ For more information on Nana Asma'u see Graneß 2023: 602–609; Waithe/ Dykemann 2023: 419–432; Boyd 1989 and Boyd/ Mack 1997.

Example Cases: Phillis Wheatley and Walatta Petros

A now quite famous example of the question of integration into a history of philosophy is the case of Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), brought to North America as a slave and the first Black woman to have her poetry published. Wheatley is a central figure in African-American literary history, but her work is increasingly being analysed from a philosophical perspective.¹⁴ Wheatley was probably born in the area of the Senegambian coast and fell into slavery at the age of seven. In Boston she was bought by John Wheatley, who ensured that she received a good education: she was taught Latin, Greek mythology and history. She published her first poem in 1767 at the age of thirteen. The fact that she mastered the English language in such a short time to a depth that enabled her to express herself literarily is already an enormous intellectual achievement. However, when she was looking for a publisher for a book of poems in 1772, her authorship of the poems was questioned. In 1772, she had to prove her authorship before a commission of eighteen *white* Boston men. The reason for convening this commission was that it was generally doubted that Africans could create literature. Wheatley convinced the commission, which certified her authorship, a proof that found its way into the preface of her collection of poems *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which was finally printed in London in 1773. In the same year, she was released from slavery. As a free Black woman, she dedicated some of her poems to the growing independence movement, which culminated in the founding of the United States in 1776. One of her poems is dedicated to the later President George Washington (*To His Excellency General Washington*, 1775). However, freedom for her also meant being free of any financial support. Wheatley continued to write poetry, eked out a living as a waitress and died impoverished in 1784 at the age of only 31.¹⁵

Phillis Wheatley's fate illustrates the situation of talented Black women in 18th century North America. The legal status as a slave made it almost impossible for men and women to acquire education and gain economically secure space for intellectual work. In addition, African men and women faced racial prejudice about their intellectual abilities and rarely had the opportunity to use the usual media of expressing philosophical thought. Even a hundred years later, this situation had hardly changed. For Black women in particular, conditions

¹⁴ See among others Gates (2003). On Wheatley's inclusion in the philosophical canon, see the arguments in Adamson/ Jeffers, 'Young, Gifted, and Black: Phillis Wheatley' one of the *Africana Philosophy* episodes of the *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, <https://historyofphilosophy.net/phillis-wheatley/> (accessed 19.04.2022).

¹⁵ For more information on Wheatley see: M.A. Richmond 1974; W.H. Robinson 1982; J.C. Shields 1988, 2008, 2011; V. Carretta 2011.

remained almost unchanged after the abolition of slavery (1863). The Black educator Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964)¹⁶ describes the educational situation of Black children in her book *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892) as follows:

“A boy, however meager his equipment and shallow his pretensions, had only to declare a floating intention to study theology and he could get all the support, encouragement and stimulus he needed, be absolved from work and invested beforehand with all dignity of his far way to office. While a self-supporting girl had to struggle on by teaching in the summer and working after school hours to keep up with her board bills and actually to fight her way against positive discouragements to the higher education.” (Cooper 1969: 31)

Less emphasis was placed on girls' education than boys' education. This was linked not only to the economic situation and labour market opportunities, but also to a misogynistic ideology that was also prevalent in Black communities. Cooper critically notes:

“While our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic. ... I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education.” (Cooper 1969: 75)

Exemplary of this state of affairs is the statement of the famous Black abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass (1817/18-1895), who stated in 1892: “I have thus far seen no book of importance written by a Negro woman and I know of no one among us who can appropriately be called famous.”¹⁷ The *American Negro Academy* (ANA), founded in 1897 and the first organisation to promote higher academic education for people of African descent, was also exclusively open to men and declared as one of its goals the promotion of “black manhood”, thus linking higher education with an image of masculinity (Washington 2000: 19). In view of a situation in which racist and sexist prejudices intersected, it is almost a

¹⁶ For more information on Anna Julia Cooper see: M.H. Washington 2000, and episode 61 “When and Where I Enter: Anna Julia Cooper” of the Africana Philosophy series of the podcast *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, <https://historyofphilosophy.net/phillis-wheatley/> (accessed 19.04.2022).

¹⁷ Letter of Frederick Douglass to M.A. Majors, 26. August 1892. Reprinted in Sterlin 1984: 436. See also Washington 2000: 19.

miracle that Phillis Wheatley was able to become literary at all – even more so in a language that was not her mother tongue. For in addition to her difficult legal and economic situation, she was thrown into an epistemic framework that was initially completely alien to her and was also marked by hostility towards Black women.

Phillis Wheatley is now a central figure in African-American literary history. But does she belong to a history of philosophy? If one reads her poems and letters carefully, the means of expression available to a woman who never received a philosophical education, one finds a concept of freedom and of art as a means of expression, reflections that could justify their inclusion in a history of philosophy, even if these thoughts remain fragmentary.¹⁸ The Wheatley case is an important example of the need to consider a wide corpus of texts when reconstructing philosophical knowledge of marginalised and oppressed groups of people.¹⁹ The integration of women writers into the history of philosophy is already practised in the European-North American feminist canon (see, among others, the case Emily Dickinson).²⁰ There is therefore no reason not to extend this principle to Phillis Wheatley. With this argument I do not want to suggest that the European-North American canon is to be taken as the yardstick for inclusion or exclusion. I would just like to point out that it would not be entirely new and unexpected to include women writers in the canon of philosophy. However, it would be new to include Black women writers and literature of (former) slaves.

Interestingly, South African philosopher Louise du Toit argues in an article in 2008 (referring to 20th century African intellectual work) that African women are not simply passively excluded from philosophy, but seem to have actively chosen other means of intellectual expression, especially literature or fiction (du Toit 2008). This also underlines the need to pay more attention to literary writing - not only in relation to such difficult situations as slavery (or other situations of oppression) - in order to reconstruct the (philosophical) knowledge of people previously excluded from the dominant narrative of philosophy.

Let us turn now to a different case: The hagiography of Walatta Petros (1592–1642), a Christian nun who was given the status of a saint in the Ethiopian

¹⁸ See episode 33 “Young, Gifted, and Black: Phillis Wheatley” of the *Africana Philosophy* series in the *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, <https://historyofphilosophy.net/phillis-wheatley/> (accessed 19.04.2022).

¹⁹ To include a broader source base for the reconstruction of knowledge traditions, given the multiply marginalised and discriminated status of Black women, is a basic demand of Black Feminism. See, among others, Hill Collins 1991; Walker 1983.

²⁰ See Deppman et al 2013.

Coptic Church because of her resistance to the Catholicisation of Ethiopia, illustrates a further methodological challenge. We have no transmitted texts from Walatta Petros herself. Our knowledge of her life, deeds, views, and statements has been handed down exclusively within the framework of a hagiography (Galawdewos/ Belcher/ Kleiner 2015). Walatta Petros was born in 1592 to a noble family. Her father and brothers were officials at the court of the Ethiopian Emperor Susenyos I (1572–1632). At a young age she was married to a man named Mälkä'ä Krəstos, one of the emperor's advisors; she had three children, all of whom died at an early age. After Susenyos privately converted to Roman Catholicism in 1612, he ordered her husband to suppress the anti-Catholic uprisings. Walatta Petros herself refused to convert to Catholicism and left her husband to take the vows of a nun of the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church in a monastery on Lake Ṭana. When Susenyos finally banned the doctrine of Ethiopian Orthodoxy in 1621, Walatta Petros began to protest publicly. Because of her protest against the adoption of Catholic beliefs and rituals, she was arrested and sentenced to death, which she narrowly escaped due to the influence of her family. In 1625 she was tried again for treason. The leader of the Jesuit priests, Alfonso Mendes, was sent to convert her, but was unsuccessful. As a result, the emperor banished Walatta Petros to the Sudan region for three years. Here she began founding religious communities with people who wanted to escape Roman Catholicism. In the course of her life, she founded seven such communities: the first in Sudan (Žäbäy, c. 1627) and six communities around Lake Tana: Čanqʷa (c. 1630), Məşelle (c. 1630), Zäge (c. 1632) Dämböza (c. 1637), Afär Färäs (c. 1638) and Zäbol/Zämbol (c. 1641). Walatta Petros served as abbess of her mobile communities and led them together with her confidante Ehete Kristos, with whom she had been acquainted since she entered the monastery. Her own life was characterised by strict asceticism: she never slept in a bed, wore the simplest clothes and never wore shoes, ate only vegetables and put ashes in her food to make it less palatable. Although she was the head of her community and came from a noble family, she did heavy work herself. Walatta Petros died in 1642 at the age of 50. She was succeeded by Ehete Kristos, who led the community until her own death in 1649. It was not until 1650 that a community at Lake Ṭana received land from Emperor Fasilidäs for the construction of a monastery dedicated to Walatta Petros. Since the 17th century, it has served as an asylum for those who wanted to escape punishment by the emperor.

Walatta Petros is an important part of the religious and historical context of 17th century Ethiopia, both as an example of lived non-violent resistance and in terms of the establishment of Coptic monastic communities and the strict ascetic rules of life designed for them. But was she a philosopher? That her resistance to Jesuit

influence and the political as well as religious subjugation of Coptic Ethiopia to the rule of Catholicism, as well as her independence from male decision-makers, be it her husband or the Emperor, is an expression of firm political, religious, and moral positions cannot be doubted. Nevertheless, it is not easy to decide whether a hagiography offers sufficient and reliable source material with which to justify Walatta Petros' inclusion in a history of philosophy. At least two objections are to be expected here: The first generally concerns the status of hagiographies as source material for a history of philosophy. The second objection could amount to criticising unequal treatment of men and women, for if the existence of a saint's vita should be sufficient to declare a woman a philosopher, would this approach not also have to be used for a re-evaluation of male thinkers? Can hagiographies be sufficient source material for the inclusion of a person in the narrative of a history of philosophy?

Vitae of saints are not stringent biographies but tell of miracles and mysteries that are supposed to justify a canonisation. In most cases, the stories were first passed on orally and only written down long after the death of the person concerned (in the case of Walatta Petros 30 years after her death). For this reason, considerable doubts can be raised against this kind of narrative as to the truthfulness of the deeds and statements of a person that have been handed down.

If we look at the European canon of female philosophers that has developed in the meantime, we come across some hagiographies or saints. One of these is Saint Catherine of Alexandria, patron saint of schools, philosophical faculties, seamstresses and dressmakers. It is uncertain whether Catherine was a historical figure at all. According to Christian tradition, she lived at the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE and suffered martyrdom under the Roman Emperor Maxentius. Today it is assumed that the Catherine legend has its origins in the murder of Hypatia. This is probably one of the reasons why Saint Catherine is rarely mentioned. Moreover, no writings by her have survived. However, the scholars Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena, who were also canonised, have a firm place in the dictionaries of women philosophers. Both are documented as historical persons and have also left behind writings: Hildegard a considerable number of treatises and letters, Catherine a series of letters with theological content. Here, therefore, the hagiography alone is not the material on which inclusion in the history of philosophy is based; in addition, there are the concepts drafted in these writings and the questions of a theological and philosophical nature discussed.

A decision as to the extent to which philosophically relevant material can be found in a saint's vita that justifies the inclusion of a person in a history of philosophy must be made on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps there are saints' vitae of women and men that justify this. In the case of Walatta Petros, it is a very detailed text that describes her biography and the historical context quite accurately. The same applies to various incidents from her life, which are particularly related to her lived faith. Philosophically relevant questions are reflected here more in her actions, such as the establishment of Coptic monastic communities in resistance to the introduction of Catholicism, in the strict rules of life drafted for the communities or her asceticism, and less in the relatively rarely explicitly mentioned statements she is said to have made. Nevertheless, the text offers source material for philosophical debates about non-violent resistance as well as metaphysical questions concerning the relationship between body and soul. This can be a starting point for further philosophical investigation.²¹

Conclusion

In recent decades several works have appeared in feminist research on the history of philosophy which address the handling of sources and the need to include more text genres in the reconstruction of the history of women philosophers. The Austrian-American historian Gerda Lerner, for example, described the methodological problems involved in tracing women philosophers in past centuries as follows:

“They are nearly impossible to find if we apply to them criteria we apply to male philosophers. Due to the constraints and disadvantages under which thinking women had to live and due to their isolation from institutional recognition, their work and careers look different from those of men. [...] I do not propose to elevate to the level of philosopher any women who had ideas of any kind or who pursued intellectual interests. But I think we need to be sensitive to the possibility that women’s thought, just like women’s art, would find different modes of expression than would men’s.” (Lerner 2000: 10-11)

Lerner (2000: 11) argues: “To find them we have to stop looking for women in the male model.”

²¹ For more on Phillis Wheatley and Walatta Petros and the challenges of a feminist historiography of philosophy, see Graneß 2023: 583–628.

The search for black women philosophers also needs to be more open and include other genres of textual production and transmission of thought and concepts than the conventional male-centred historiography of philosophy. It is important to consider smaller works and messages delivered in other forms, for example in poetry such as that of Phillis Wheatley, and even to study fragmentary, partially developed insights. One of the basic demands of feminist historiography of philosophy is to find new source material: to use different textual genres and a wider range of modes of expression and philosophical practices (see Alanen/ Witt 2004; Witt/ Shapiro 2020). Philosophical treatises in the classical (European) sense can hardly be expected from pre-twentieth century Black women,²² not least because in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa knowledge and education was transmitted and institutionalised differently than in the European or Arab academic tradition. Moreover, structural discrimination, such as the exclusion of Black women from institutions of (higher) education in Africa and the African diaspora in 19th and 20th century, hindered Black women from engaging in intellectual activities and using academic forms of expression. Thus, they were forced by circumstances to resort to other media and literary genres to express thoughts, concepts and theories. In this respect, the reconstruction of the history of Black women philosophers must examine a variety of practices and genres of philosophising.

In sum, a proper revision of the canon of the history of philosophy cannot be carried out solely from an intercultural or global perspective but must also address and correct patriarchal structures of exclusion – in all regions of the world. Such a revision aims to do justice to women philosophers who have been marginalised or forgotten simply because of their gender and/or race – despite the originality or relevance of their ideas. But more fundamentally, it is about correcting an image of philosophy that has been shaped by male philosophers and, consequently, by a male perspective, and thus seems to provide a tacit historical justification for male supremacy in the history of philosophy. In this respect, a feminist critique and reform of the historiography of philosophy has direct implications for our understanding of philosophy. Linking the feminist perspective with an anti-racist and global perspective is therefore of particular importance. The aim must be to bring together the theoretical and methodological reflections of global and feminist research in the history of philosophy and to draw conclusions for a historiography of philosophy for the future.

²² The few exceptions rather confirm the rule.

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