

Indigenous Thoughts and Ancient Philosophy

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Abstract: This article grapples with the relationships and assumptions that define how Indigenous philosophy is or is not related to the study of ancient philosophy. I show that these assumptions are defined by a willingness to contrast Greek and Roman philosophy with Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems as being from a distant past. I argue that this tendency reveals larger questions at hand: what ‘counts’ as philosophy? Who can ‘do’ philosophy? In the first section of this article, I address these questions following the works of Charles Mills, Hamid Dabashi. I argue that Indigenous people can do philosophy. In the final sections of this article, taking lessons from Coyote, V.F. Cordova, and Brian Burkhart I demonstrate how Indigenous philosophies are beneficial for creating space for new methods on approaching ancient texts.

Keywords: Indigenous philosophy, ancient philosophy, Charles Mills, Hamid Dabashi, Global philosophy.

I begin this article with two stories.¹ This first story is neither Wiyot nor Yurok, but it features characters that resonate with the stories I was told as a child. Brian Yazzie Burkhart, Cherokee, tells this story at the beginning of a chapter entitled ‘What Coyote and Thales can teach us’:

‘Coyote is wandering around in his usual way when he comes upon a prairie dog town. The prairie dogs laugh and curse at him. Coyote gets angry and wants revenge. The sun is high in the sky. Coyote decides he wants clouds to come. He is starting to hate the prairie dogs and so thinks about rain. Just then a cloud appears. Coyote says “I wish it would rain on me”. And that is what happened. Coyote says “I wish there were rain at my feet”. And that is what happened. “I want the rain up to my waist” he then says. And that is what happened. The water continues to rise higher and higher as Coyote begins to think and speak about it. Before long, the whole land is flooded’ (2004, p. 16).

Burkhart goes on to contrast the figure of Coyote with the image of Thales in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Plato’s Thales is a version of the true philosopher, so engrossed in looking up at the sky that he does not even notice he has fallen into a hole. Thales’ enslaved Thracian mocks that he claims to know the heavens, but does not know what is under his feet (*Theat.* 174b). Burkhart’s invocation of this story alongside the one he chooses to share of Coyote emphasizes a core mistake when approaching philosophy: forgetting to be connected with what is around you. His comparison of Coyote and Thales also offers a useful contrast for this article in terms of the dividing lines between ‘ancient’ and ‘Indigenous’ philosophy. The former tradition is given accolades as the beginnings of philosophy, shaping notions of

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civilization and progress. The latter, however, has been understood until recently to be representative of a barbarian or minoritized philosophical discourse, if anything at all.

The apparent dichotomy between ancient and Indigenous philosophy is made clear in my second story. In the spring of 2022, during the first year of my PhD, a seminar was offered on the historiography of philosophy. This seminar was loosely structured on a lecture series given under the same name by Michael Frede at Oxford in the 1980s. The seminar asked us to consider what we were doing as modern subjects when we study ancient philosophers. Was what we ourselves were doing really something we could call philosophy? Or were our research projects better described as intellectual history? To answer these questions, we not only looked at Frede's response but also examined a series of articles which attempted to 'place' ancient philosophy inside the purview of the discipline of philosophy. As we moved through the seminar, one constant in the pieces we read were the brief mentions of 'Native American' philosophy, which were consistently contrasted with ancient philosophy.² I began to keep track of these instances and noticed that a certain conception of what constituted Native American philosophy underpinned these remarks: according to these scholars, whatever Native American philosophy was belonged to the distant past. I began to feel that as someone who is Indigenous, even though I work on Plato and Aristotle, I might not be able to do philosophy at all. I also became worried that these remarks reflected a pervasive belief that there is or was no philosophy in North, Central, or South America until Europeans graced us with the gift of philosophy. Further assumptions surrounding the 'past'-ness of Indigenous philosophy became apparent. One reason it seemed so easy to group Greek and Roman philosophy with Indigenous philosophy is a shared assumption that the beliefs which marked Indigenous thought are primitive and no longer practiced. Just like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Indigenous thought is dead and in the distant past.³ The tension then arises from a presumption of shared distance between modern academic philosophers and the history of philosophy.

In this article, I unpack the presumptions made about ancient and Indigenous philosophy along with the concerns they left with me.⁴ Those concerns stem from an uneasiness with the ways in which Indigenous peoples and Indigenous systems of knowledge are contrasted with the Greek and Roman tradition. The present piece also meditates on larger questions relating to the definition of philosophy itself: what 'counts' as philosophy, and what does not? Further to this, is the title of 'philosophy' even worth pursuing, particularly to the intellectual communities it has excluded? As I examine these concerns, I will begin by surveying some of the statements that have been made which compare Indigenous philosophy to Greek and Roman philosophical traditions. In part, this will include examining how scholars of ancient philosophy relate their own subject to the history of philosophy by defining their academic discipline through the exclusion of other philosophical traditions. I will then consider what it even means to be included or excluded from 'philosophy' itself. In offering a critique of 'philosophy' in its limited form (i.e., as an

² I offer the story of this seminar not as a condemnation but an explanation for the purposes of this article. I would like to thank the convener and my fellow participants for encouraging me to offer a presentation on the remarks we encountered in the seminar.

³ I am invoking the language of 'the dead' here to parallel the rhetoric Rorty uses to describe his views on the history of philosophy, which will be explored in the first section.

⁴ See Todd (2016) for a similar approach to critiquing academic disciplines. In the case of Todd, the discipline under critique is anthropology but the main contentions are the same: a refusal to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous thought.

academic discipline), I show how Charles Mills, through his development of a Black philosophy, offers a way to reconceptualize philosophy. Even further, by engaging with Hamid Dabashi's influential article 'Can non-Europeans think?', I contend that Mills' arguments are in keeping with the calls from anti-colonial thinkers to abandon philosophy. Mills and Dabashi lay the groundwork to provide a critique of inclusive or 'global' philosophy, which seeks to show how non-Western philosophy can exhibit the same traits and 'rigor' of academic philosophy. In the final section of this article, I show how these distinctions between philosophy and thought, and the critiques of disciplinarity, are apparent in Indigenous philosophies. Using work from V.F. Cordova and Brian Burkhardt, I show how Indigenous philosophy creates space for broader conceptions of thinking and offering new methods for thinking with ancient thought.

Before we begin, I want to make a brief note about my use of the term 'Indigenous'. For the most part, when I use the word, I will be referring to Indigenous people from North, Central, and South American contexts. This is not because I think this is the only claim to Indigeneity, but because I am speaking as a North American Indigenous person. While speaking from this positionality, I also do not foreclose the interpretive possibilities which emerge from the scholarship of African philosophy, Indigenous African philosophy, and Indigenous philosophy in other areas of the world.

Mapping Ancient and Indigenous Philosophy

τὸ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἔργον ἔνιοί φασιν ἀπὸ βαρβάρων ἄρξαι
'Some say that the work of philosophy began among the barbarians'

— Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 1.1

This section surveys the comments that have been made about the status of ancient philosophy and its place in the history of philosophy. Specifically, I will be pointing to moments where these discussants choose to include or exclude 'Indigenous', 'Native American', or even 'Barbarian philosophy'. My suggestion is that these small moments (sometimes obviously—sometimes not so obviously) reveal a slip: whatever Indigenous philosophy might be, is not thought of as deserving the title of 'philosophy'.

To begin with, I turn to Michael Frede's *Historiography of Philosophy*. This work, published in 2021, began as a lecture series held at Oxford between 1989 and 1990. In the lectures, Frede is concerned with the question of what ancient philosophers are doing. Is it doxography? Is it philosophy? What is the difference between a historical version of history of philosophy and a philosophical version of history of philosophy? (Frede, 2021). These questions point towards a worry that what we do in ancient philosophy might not actually be 'philosophy' properly speaking. Here, I want to flag that this is a worry that will crop up in the rest of the sources I will be examining. This anxiety pertains to a suspicion that though the ancients seemed to be doing philosophy, what modern scholars are doing might seem like something very different—something that attempts to track intellectual history and context, but not something that is interested in providing and developing answers to philosophical questions.

Returning to Frede, his lecture on doxography attempts to rehabilitate the genre from the idea that it is merely a collection of various philosophers' opinions, suggesting instead that doxography can be a philosophical exercise in its own right (Frede, 2021, p. 20). Frede analyzes the lengthy history of the genre, from its origin in antiquity with Diogenes Laertius

(third century CE), to the doxographical practices of nineteenth century Europe. As part of his characterization of philosophical doxography as developmental (he views it as increasingly critical and comprehensive over time), Frede includes a reference to Indigenous philosophy:

‘And when we come to Brucker [Johann Jakob Brucker, 1696-1770] we not only find ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy but also barbarian philosophy, including the philosophy of the Native Americans’ (2021, p. 24).

The ‘philosophy of Native Americans’ is subsumed under the general umbrella of ‘barbarian philosophy’. On the one hand, this counts Indigenous peoples as having philosophy, but the language surrounding this inclusion is not something to take lightly.

Other philosophers interested in the question of what philosophy is, and what the history of philosophy is specifically, have similar slips. Richard Rorty, for instance, discusses what historians of philosophy who apply anachronistic philosophic or scientific concepts really want: namely, for past philosophers to be persuaded to accept modern differences on ‘grounds they would accept’ (Rorty, 1984, p. 51). In making this argument, Rorty imagines an encounter between an ideal Aristotle, an ‘Aborigine’ [Indigenous Person], and a Gulag guard. This exercise is in service of his broader conception of one genre of history of philosophy: historical or rational accounts. This genre seeks to ask what a philosopher from the past might think about a present issue (1984, p. 50). In pursuit of these questions, Rorty makes a direct comparison to the aims of the anthropologist who ‘wants to know how primitives talk to fellow-primitives as well as how they react to instruction from missionaries. For this purpose he tries to get inside their heads, and to think in terms which he would never dream of employing at home’ (1984, p. 50). It is through this account of a historical approach to history of philosophy, that Rorty describes what the Indigenous person can be ‘brought to accept’ in contrast to Aristotle:

‘The ideal aborigine can eventually be brought to accept a description of himself as having cooperated in the continuation of a kinship system designed to facilitate the unjust economic arrangements of his tribe. An ideal Gulag guard can eventually be brought to regard himself as having betrayed his loyalty to his fellow-Russians. An ideal Aristotle can be brought to describe himself as having mistaken the preparatory taxonomic stages of biological research for the essence of all scientific inquiry. Each of these imaginary people, by the time he has been brought to accept such a new description of what he meant or did, has become “one of us”’ (Rorty, 1984, p. 51).

These comments not only represent a racist and regressive view of the status of Indigenous peoples but showcase the flippancy with which Indigenous thought is treated. We might ask why Rorty has chosen this specific example. Which tribes have unjust economic systems? And what makes those systems unjust? According to who? That the invocation of Indigenous people here is one of a stereotype—so far away from grasping any specifics that it is hard to imagine if there is any Tribe that actually has the practices Rorty describes—showcases the depths of racism at play here.⁵ That this example is preceded by the description of an anthropologist who is not just studying but assessing for the purposes of missionary work implicates him in settler colonial violence. If the first example contains an implicit assumption of colonial violence, the second example surrounding the Gulag guard

⁵ See Blackhawk and Wilner (2018) for a discussion of Franz Boas’ impact in moving away from describing Indigenous peoples as primitive, as well as critiques of his method.

is telling. We might not know the individual Gulag guard or suspect that this is another disingenuous example made by Rorty, but the fact that this is more specific should tell us something about the minimization of Indigenous thought. In light of these examples, the question of whether or not Aristotle might accept a different account of the natural world seems banal.

Finally, Rorty's example is useful in showcasing the temporal assumptions made about 'ancient' philosophies. Throughout his article, Rorty is emphatic in labelling past philosophers as the 'dead' where in this first genre of philosophy in particular the questions surrounding its methods are boiled down to 'making clear what the dead really said' (1984, p. 53).⁶ It is telling that his imagined anthropologist is in the more recent past. Aristotle, however, is used throughout the article as a stock example of someone who is *really* dead. As will be shown in the rest of this article, the assumptions about what and who are in the past reveals what scholars are willing to label as philosophy. Aristotle is very dead and representative of thought which we would call mistaken but he is nonetheless a philosopher. Indigenous peoples, however, exist in the confines of anthropology, contributing to philosophy in neither past nor present.

More recent attempts at describing ancient philosophy and its special status are instructive to show how it is defined against other modes of thinking. Julia Annas' *Ancient Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (2023) dedicates a chapter to discussing how ancient philosophy became mostly Greek and Roman. Annas considers the special status that has been attributed to the Greeks, and as a consequence, the Romans for 'using reasoning'.⁷ Here, she addresses the 'unfortunate results' that this focus has had on ancient philosophy—namely, that other areas of the world which were engaging in philosophy during contemporary periods are downplayed, especially in regards to the 'Eastern' and 'Western Tradition' (Annas, 2023, p.103). In particular, she gestures towards some of the philosophical traditions of India as concurrent with many of the Greek and Roman philosophers, and in many ways influential towards some of their discussions (2023, pp. 104-105). What is more, she also points to (what she labels as) postcolonial critiques which have attempted to correct this divide, noting that 'we have yet to reach a completely postcolonial view, which can get beyond the false contrast of "Western rationalism" and "Eastern mysticism" and recognize the strong affinities between some of the Indian traditions and ancient Greek and Roman traditions more familiar in the West' (2023, p. 106). What is notable here is the use of 'we' in what postcolonial thought has failed to provide. The 'we' is left ambiguous and no clear citations are made of who the postcolonial thinkers are that have been unable to bridge Eastern and Western philosophies.⁸

Finally, Annas chooses to end the chapter by retelling a story written by a second century CE satirical author, Lucian of Samosata:

⁶ In asking this question, Rorty uses Columbus and the 'discovery' of America as an example, however, it is not as helpful for the purposes of this article, but still worth noting nonetheless (1984, p. 53).

⁷ Annas quotes Martin West (1986) who said the following: 'What provokes admiration is the mental vigor and independence with which these people sought after coherent systems and did not shrink from following their lines of thought to astonishing conclusions. It may well be that contact with oriental cosmology and theology helped to liberate their imagination; it certainly gave them many suggestive ideas. But they taught themselves to reason. Philosophy as we understand it is a Greek idea.' This sense of specialness attributed to the Greeks will be discussed in the next section.

⁸ See Lance (forthcoming) on the use of Aristotle. See also Wynter (2003) for a broader break down and understanding of this history.

'In his essay *The Runaways* [8-21] he has Philosophy remind her father, the chief god Zeus, of the reason he sent her down to earth in the first place, namely so that humans, hitherto ignorantly and violently mismanaging their lives, would do better. First, she continues, she went on her improving way to India, to the Brahmans, then to Ethiopia, Egypt, and Babylon, and then to the wild north. Finally she went to the Greeks...Philosophy goes on to complain about the less than wonderful time she went on to have in Greece. Most people respect her, she says, though without understanding her, and there are genuine philosophers who love and strive for truth, and this makes it worth while' (2023, p. 106).

In some ways, ending with this story points to some of the contradictions of attributing a special place for Greeks because of their development of philosophy. It seems difficult to square with the Athenians' reaction to Socrates or the Platonic complaint of sophistry running rampant. However, what is more interesting in this story is where Philosophy goes first: from India, she travels to Ethiopia, Egypt, and Babylon, areas which are still contending with having a claim to philosophy in contemporary academic philosophy.⁹ Furthermore, even in this story there is a gesture to a 'wild north', again appealing to the vaguest of stereotypes to conjure up images of Scythians or mythical Hyperboreans.¹⁰ What is most noticeable about Annas' choice to end here is what areas of the world are not spoken to. Can redefining ancient philosophy only be done on an East/West divide, where West is a stand in for Western, white, often European practices of philosophy?¹¹ Where might Indigenous people fit in for Philosophy in this story?

There are further examples that are both implicit and explicit. For instance, consider the philosopher Levinas' remark: 'I always say, but in private, that the Greeks and the Bible are all that is serious in humanity. Everything else is dancing'. Or the inciting incident for Dabashi's piece 'Can Non-Europeans Think?', an introductory comment preceding an opinion piece by Slavoj Žižek, which reads:

'There are many important and active philosophers today: Judith Butler in the United States, Simon Critchley in England, Victoria Camps in Spain, Jean-Luc Nancy in France, Chantal Mouffe in Belgium, Gianni Vattimo in Italy, Peter Sloterdijk in Germany and in Slovenia, Slavoj Žižek, not to mention others working in Brazil, Australia and China' (Dabashi, 2013).

Again, we see that there is an omission in which places have philosophers. Not only that, but the list also implies that whiteness is the prerequisite of philosophy. Where we might imagine non-white philosophers would be—in this instance, the last three places mentioned—again we see the slip from the specific to the generic. There are philosophers working in Brazil, Australia, and China, but who are they? What does it serve not to include specific names in this list?

There is a similar statement to those quoted above, made in jest, by Jonathan Barnes in his infamous article 'Bagpipe music,' which surveys the declining state of ancient philosophy (Barnes, 2006). In his introduction he provides three warning statements:

⁹ This will be explored further in the next section.

¹⁰ See Gagné (2021).

¹¹ The idea that the Greeks in particular are responsible for Western philosophy and technology is still rearing its head, see for instance Soames (2019).

‘First, I can only talk about what is quaintly called “ancient philosophy,” i.e., about Act One of the history of philosophy. I don’t know to what extent my remarks hold good in other parts of the world. Secondly, for the last decade I’ve been working in French-speaking Europe. I don’t know, except at second-hand or by inference, what things are like in America or Australia or Antarctica. Thirdly, I shall say nothing about one half—and in most cases by far the more important half—of any ancient philosopher’s activities; for I shall say nothing at all about teaching’ (2004, p. 17).

We here see a flippant and casual regard for where philosophy might be done—with the joke being that the places he names are increasingly absurd. Who could be doing philosophy in Australia or Antarctica? Barnes continues his screed by lamenting the use of TLG (a searchable database of all extant texts in ancient Greek), the increasing metrics used to judge academic success via quantity and not quality, and the insistence that ancient philosophy produces people who can do philosophy.

The article ends on a darker note than might be indicated in the introduction. He warns that philosophy, along with Classics, will decline:

‘The Knight is the most dangerous. There is no unhorsing him. He is there for keeps. Classics will continue to decline. In a few decades, the study of Greek will match the study of Coptic or of Akkadian. And there’s nothing anyone can do about that. (But perhaps here will be something we can make of it. Akkadian—if not Coptic—seems to flourish)’ (2006, p.20).

It is his final remarks in the conclusion, paired with the third warning in the introduction, that the article will not cover half of what philosophy is—i.e. teaching—that I want to focus on here. The fading of the study of Greek with the rise of other languages like Akkadian and Coptic relies on what he has left out of the discussion, that is teaching languages. If the focus of the article is to track the decline of ancient philosophy, why end on a note that is not even covered? The broader question that deserves to be unpacked however, is why Greek would ‘match’ Coptic or Akkadian. What underlying assumptions are being made about the study of Greek, that has privileged it to such a degree that it can only fall to ‘non-Western’ languages? I think the answer to this is that Greek, and ancient philosophy, is seen as integral to the development and maintenance of Western philosophy.

What Western philosophy looks like in contrast to non-Western philosophies will be explored in the next section. For now, we might ask: what does reviewing these comments tell us? On the side of Frede and Rorty, there seems to be some type of concern with what is going on in ancient philosophy, and its status as philosophy proper or merely history. ‘Including’ Indigenous thought in doxographies, like the case Frede points to, is a positive in one sense, but the idea that it is ‘barbarian’ and ‘other’ should give us pause. Rorty is, I think, more honest in his analysis. He does not even consider whether Indigenous people have thought but goes ahead to conclude that any Indigenous way of life should be considered defective. Panning out to broader comments about who does philosophy and where it is done demonstrates that the status of Indigenous philosophy is not just a foil ancient philosophers can point to, but something all philosophers should contend with seriously. Barnes’ comments show us the limits of a ‘global’ view of philosophy. The places where philosophy is imagined are marked by their relationship to western philosophy and the traditional canon.

Locating thought and philosophy

The last section explored the associations between ‘ancient’ philosophies and non-Western philosophies. We saw a tendency to worry about the philosophical relevance of maintaining Greek and Roman philosophy as a discipline. This section seeks to further unpack the underlying claims being made about the status of philosophy as a tradition, or what types of thinking and people get awarded with the title of philosophy and who loses out. I explore this concern through three examples. In the first instance, I consider the question of who is capable of philosophy as a question of canon. Drawing on the work of James Maffie, I explore what it means to be included in ‘Club Philosophy’. From here, I consider two different approaches to ‘Club Philosophy’ that I will argue offer routes to the critique of philosophy as a discipline. In the first instance, I draw on the late Charles Mills’ arguments for what Black philosophy offers for our understanding of the world. I then contrast Mills’ arguments with Dabashi’s argument for disambiguating philosophy from thought. I explore the distinctions being made between philosophy and thought, and their advantages, against the more common tendency to expand the canon via ‘World philosophy’. While the main purpose of this section is to explore the contours between philosophy and thought, and how this affects the understanding of philosophy as a discipline, I also take seriously the developments of ‘World philosophy’ and argue that both Mills and Dabashi provide reasons to be critical of the trend.

First, Maffie introduces his remarks on ‘Club Philosophy’ by drawing out a distinction that is often implicit: having a philosophy versus actually doing philosophy. In *Aztec Metaphysics* (2014), Maffie introduces the distinction in this way:

‘Contemporary Anglo-American and European academic philosophers routinely distinguish having a philosophy, in the sense of holding an implicit worldview, ideology, or “cosmovisión,” from doing philosophy, in the sense of self-consciously and critically reflecting upon and speculating about the nature, structure, and constitution of reality, the nature of truth, the nature of right and wrong, the possibility of human knowledge, the meaning of life, and so on’ (2014, p. 4).

What having a philosophy is, and who has a philosophy according to Maffie is ‘the sole invention and possession of Western culture beginning with the Socratics and the Sophists’ (2014, p. 5). Non-western philosophy is assumed, according to Maffie, to exhibit the former: having but not doing. This assumption is almost atemporal, as speculations are made about both pre- and post-colonization belief systems. Mayan and Nahua beliefs are cast in a distant past, and importantly those beliefs do not count as being grounded in philosophy, but rather exhibit ‘having a philosophy’. Maffie’s argument is based on the idea that these philosophies stem from religious and spiritual practices. The same assumptions are made literal in the case of León-Portilla’s groundbreaking *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes* (2006). The English edition and publication of this work changes the title from ‘*filosofía*’ to ‘thought’.

For Maffie, León-Portilla’s work, which provides the first published account systematizing Nahua philosophies and metaphysics, represents the stakes of membership in ‘Club Philosophy’. Navigating membership might go one of two ways: ‘They may seek admission into the club by arguing that what they do sufficiently resembles what bona fide club members do. León-Portilla pursues this strategy on behalf of the Aztecs. Or they may reject the philosophy versus nonphilosophy binary—along with the entire debate—as a now discredited, self-serving relic of Western colonialism (racism, modernism, paternalism, etc.), not worry about whether or not what they do qualifies as “real” philosophy and continue

doing what they have always been doing' (Maffie, 2014, pp. 6-7). There are many examples to pursue, even within the realms of ancient philosophy. For instance, Barry Hallen asks why African philosophy is not treated or mentioned in ancient philosophy courses and scholarship (Hallen, 2002).¹²

On the other hand, there are those who pursue 'philosophy', but not on the basis of inclusion. I argue that this is what Mills is interested in as he develops his vision for Black philosophy (Mills, 2013). His vision for Black philosophy begins with a critique of white, Western philosophy:

'White (male) philosophy's confrontation of Man and Universe, or even Person and Universe, is really predicated on taking personhood for granted and thus excludes the differential experience of those who have ceaselessly had to fight to have their personhood recognized in the first place. Without even recognizing that it is doing so, Western philosophy abstracts away from what has been the central feature of the lives of Africans transported against their will to the Americas...' (2013, p. 9).

These comments come from an exploration of what Mills terms 'sub personhood' or the experience many people feel as a part of being racialized as Black (2013, pp.4-7). Within this, however, Mills is able to recognize the futility of Western philosophy and create the possibilities for Black philosophy. The questions central for Black philosophy revolve around a socially and historically contextualized ontology (2013, pp. 10-12). As such the project for Black philosophy which Mills is interested in constructing is one where philosophy of race, or the explanation of the subordination and sub personhood of certain groups into racial categories, is crucial to understand the political and ethical dimensions of today's world. Given these aims, I argue that Mills is not interested in pursuing either route that Maffie provides. Instead, Mills shows how Black philosophy can contribute to pressing issues about the world, without appealing to the methods of Western philosophy.¹³

Whereas Mills wants a very specific version of Black philosophy that can satisfactorily explain the status of the world as something made up of and informed by a global system of white supremacy, a different set of solutions is offered by 'World philosophy'. 'World philosophy' is representative of a reaction to some of the critiques offered above—that the history of philosophy, and what is studied and taught in a typical philosophy course, is too focused on European whiteness. In the same vein as Annas' consideration of the status of Eastern philosophy against Western philosophy, these books, often encyclopedic in style and content, place various philosophies from different parts of the world together. They often take a liberal and multiculturalist stance on World philosophy, where the correction to the problem of exclusion is simply one of inclusion. For instance, the introductory anthology series *A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* includes stand-alone works on African, Indian, Chinese, and Islamic philosophy.¹⁴ There is no mention of Indigenous philosophy in this series as it stands. Where Indigenous philosophy is mentioned, as the case in Van Norden's

¹² I want to emphasize that I do not view Hallen's questions about the status of ancient African philosophy as similar to the arguments made by those interested in World philosophy presented below.

¹³ The force with which Mills develops his 'epistemologies of ignorance' and white ignorance in particular also demonstrates his disinterest in claiming that Black philosophy is like white/Western philosophy. Instead, Mills' conception of ignorance argues the inverse. For the beginnings of this see Mills (2007).

¹⁴ See Adamson (2018), Adamson and Ganeri (2020), and Adamson and Jeffers (2025) for those works.

book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Manifesto for Multiculturalism*, it is not the primary focus of the work. Instead, Van Norden offers Chinese philosophy as a model for creating a multicultural version of philosophy in academic departments (Van Norden, 2017).¹⁵ These examples show the initial route proposed by Maffie: attempts to argue that non-Western philosophies show the capacity to be at the same level of those already in ‘Club Philosophy’.

I offer Mills in contrast to those who support a global philosophy. In part, Mills shows how simple methods of inclusion fail to address the underlying assumptions behind why non-Western philosophies are so often discounted: a refusal to understand and engage with the realities of racism. Dabashi offers insight on a related assumption: that non-Western ideas must speak to and with the same types of claims to universality as Western thought. The assumption goes even further, that any non-Western thinker must present a legible account of why their thought is philosophy. In response to this expectation, Dabashi questions the claims to universality and ‘self-conscious confidence’ that often comes with Euroamerican philosophy (Dabashi, 2013). Dabashi asks why people like Žižek and Butler get labeled as philosophers or at the very least public intellectuals, while modern philosophy in Cuba, China, and India, if mentioned at all, gets prefixed with ‘ethno-’. In other words, Dabashi shows the consistency with which non-Western peoples are given the label of ‘thought,’ let alone philosophy. Instead of arguing for Euroamerican philosophy to accommodate non-European philosophy, Dabashi reframes the debate: ‘The question is rather the manner in which non-European thinking can reach self-consciousness and evident universality, not at the cost of whatever European philosophers may think of themselves for the world at large, but for the purpose of offering alternative (complementary or contradictory) visions of reality more rooted in the lived experiences of people in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America’ (Dabashi, 2013).¹⁶

The emphasis away from philosophy to thought is particularly helpful here. If one of the problems Dabashi—and, as we have seen, Mills—recognizes is a self-assuredness in universalizing thought, what does it mean to pursue the title of philosophy? In what ways does World philosophy, as has been discussed here, actually provide space for alternative visions?¹⁷ I suggest that it attempts to fit marginalized thinkers into the space of Western philosophy at the expense of losing the contours, nuances, and applicability of their thought into the world. This suggestion is in line with both Dabashi and Mills. For Dabashi, the problem with the focus on ‘philosophy’ does not leave room for expansive re-thinking of the canon. ‘Thinking’ however does not come with all of the baggage that a discipline like philosophy brings. Moreover, ‘philosophy’ as a term is more inclusive for Dabashi—it can allow for different types of thoughts and theories to exist as something which should be taken seriously. Dabashi then showcases the opposite of what has been explored in this section. Disinterested in resurrecting, purifying, and curing philosophy, he instead offers a route out of philosophy. This route focuses on the practices of thought and thinking, and in particular, looking for types of thought that have not been considered. Instead of relying on arguments for a multicultural and liberal approach to inclusion, the thoughts looked for here

¹⁵ This approach has been critiqued for Van Norden’s methodology. Kim (2019) argues that Van Norden’s views cannot and do not effectively confront endemic racism, or much of the discipline’s investment in whiteness (p. 626).

¹⁶ We might also think of Wynter (2003) here.

¹⁷ Furthering the use of Mills in this article, these questions are representative of what Mills calls an ‘epistemology of ignorance’. See Mills (1997) for his articulation on this.

are at the core of what is going on within the debates of expanding the canon in philosophy or adding new members to 'Club philosophy'.

Crucially, however, embedded within Dabashi's critique of Eurocentrism in philosophy is the refrain 'why not the dignity of "philosophy"' (Dabashi, 2013). Along with the arguments presented above, Dabashi is concerned that if non-Europeans are denied the title of philosophy, philosophy will only be delegated to Western public intellectuals (Dabashi, 2013). I take this refrain as important in distinguishing between thought and philosophy. As I have argued above, Dabashi presents a clear case for rejecting the call to incorporate all thinking into philosophy. The focus on thought, instead of indicating a disregard for complex systems—as the change made to Léon-Portilla's book title shows—demands that philosophy as practiced in the Euroamerican system makes a case for itself. It is this distinction that I take to be the key link between Dabashi's arguments and Mills. On the face of it, they look to be in a slight disagreement, especially with Mills' acceptance of the term philosophy. However, I take it that what Mills has done with his development of Black philosophy is to move the concept of philosophy away from the traditional, academic space of the discipline. In this way, both Mills and Dabashi offer visions of philosophy that operate outside of Western philosophy's epistemological landscape. This allows us to avoid the pitfalls of 'global philosophy' and, as I will show in the next section, creates space for thinking through what Indigenous philosophy can offer outside of the confines of philosophy as an academic discipline.

Locality and Indigenous Philosophy

The previous section has demonstrated the limitations of viewing philosophy as primarily an academic discipline. Both Dabashi and Mills show us how to move beyond the confines of disciplinarity and the benefits of doing so. What has been underdiscussed is the status of Indigenous philosophy and how it might reject disciplinary boundaries on its own accord. It should be noted that Mills does offer a view of what he takes to be Indigenous philosophy in his development of Black philosophy:

'Anti-Native American racism was, obviously, central to the founding of the United States, and the white settler states of the Americas more generally. But the creation of the reservation system means that today they are a marginal presence in the daily life of the white American polity. Moreover, both in the U.S. and the Latin American nations where they make up a larger proportion of the population, their relation to race is ambivalent. Though their racial categorization—Indians—was, of course, crucial to white settler ideology, it is not generally one that they have embraced themselves, except for contingent reasons of political solidarity against the white man, since they retain their prequest civilizational identities. So their philosophical opposition to the conquest really involves the reclaiming of these distinct and disparate ethnic identities and their linked philosophical outlooks: it is not a philosophy of race as such' (2021, p. 30).

Mills' understanding of Native American philosophy is driven by a historical account of racism and settler-colonialism. This move is motivated by Mills' requirements for a philosophy that can provide a comprehensive account of a philosophy of race. What I take seriously in this description of what Indigenous philosophy will look like is that it reclaims 'distinct' philosophical outlooks. These distinctions are made on the basis of unique cultural understandings of space and place. The two philosophers I engage with here, then, represent

only a small portion of Indigenous philosophy. The emphasis I want to make clear at the outset is that Indigenous philosophy is not a monolith but is representative of the diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples globally.

This section seeks to move philosophy beyond the confines of academia with accounts of philosophy from an Indigenous North American perspective. Drawing on V.F. Cordova and Brian Burkhart's approaches and conceptions of Native American or Indigenous Philosophy, I argue that Indigenous philosophy is helpful precisely in its ability to go beyond boundaries. With both works, I make a case for reclaiming American philosophical traditions away from the Euroamerican tradition and as a space for Indigenous traditions and thoughts. The questions of the boundaries of philosophy, or our spatial conceptions of the discipline, also correlate to the temporal questions set out in the first section of this article. Here, I argue that 'Indigenous' philosophy does not and should not necessitate an association with Greek and Roman philosophy. Instead, the urge to place Indigenous and ancient thought next to each other is emblematic of Cordova's criticism of Western assumptions about Indigenous philosophy. In this same vein, I show how Brian Burkhart offers a critique and engagement of ancient thought that demonstrates the benefits of Indigenous philosophy for the history of philosophy, rather than as a contrast to the history of philosophy.

In V.F. Cordova's work 'Approaches to Native American Philosophy', she is concerned with what a non-native philosopher could get out of Native philosophy, and how to do that philosophically. She lays out three underlying assumptions that Western philosophers make when dealing with Native philosophy: '(1) the view that all human beings are operating on a common theme; (2) that non-Western peoples are a less complex form of being, less developed than Westerners; and (3) that Indigenous peoples are incapable of engaging in philosophical discussions' (Cordova, 2004, p. 31).

We have seen, I think, all three assumptions laid out in the previous discussion—the confidence of Western philosophy, the assumptions about Indigenous ways of life, and the less than sensitive inclusion of Native philosophy as 'Barbarian'. Cordova proposes solutions to these assumptions: in the first case, the solution is to move away from comparison and to look for a common theme. This leads immediately to the solution for two. She notes that the act of looking for something in common or saying 'this is like' often slips from an equitable comparison to 'this is a less developed form than that'. Rejecting this approach is key (Cordova, 2004, p. 32). Here is where I want to return to the question of teaching Indigenous philosophy with ancient philosophy. I think the desire to do this is partially because many Indigenous philosophies are ancient and trace a long tradition of thought. However, I think this does not quite address what happens when comparing the two, not least because the moniker of 'Ancient' denies Indigenous presents and futures. I think Cordova is right that it is easy for people to slip from an open comparison to 'this is a less developed form of that', not the least because Indigenous knowledge is already epistemically marginalized. What good does it do to put Indigenous philosophy in the past, allowing all the assumptions that we have surpassed and progressed from these views?

Returning to the assumptions, Cordova's solution to one is to reject a 'this is like that' approach, and her solution to three is a simple denial. Cordova then details a moment speaking with a fluent Anishnawbe speaker: 'He gave me the literal translation of engwaamizin as "tread carefully". Some, he said, interpreted this as "be careful", but, he pointed out, it means much more than that. Unspoken, but understood in that word is a whole worldview having to do with humans' place and effect on the universe. From my own experience...I discovered that many of our family discussions around the kitchen table

consisted of very sophisticated philosophical dialogue...We did not use the language of philosophers but the activity and the intent were the same' (Cordova, 2004, p. 32).¹⁸ Returning to the question of philosophy, the philosophical endeavor should 'extend its present perspective to an attempt to understand all of the possible ranges of human thought...Imagine for example instead of a concept of "progress" we had merely a concept of "change"' (Cordova, 2004, p. 33). The historiographical and doxographical remarks surveyed at the start of this article, for instance, might look different with an application of Cordova's urging to tread carefully and view the history of philosophy through change rather than progress.

Cordova's work has continued to inspire philosophers who are interested in how philosophy can be reshaped to allow for Indigenous philosophy. Brian Burkhart in his book *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (2019) develops a critique of Western philosophy. This critique is centered on Burkhart's conception of Western philosophy as being delocalized in contrast to a localized philosophy. In this respect, Burkhart views the fundamental problem with Western philosophy as its disinterest in the relationship between peoples, their community and land. Environmental philosophy and questions of environmental ethics have entered the field too late in order to showcase that Western philosophy is capable of providing answers to questions centered around land and community.

Burkhart considers the history of Western philosophy from Aristotle to Descartes and Kant to showcase the nature of these claims. In particular, he takes aim at Aristotle as the originator of the Law of Non-Contradiction, an instance where Western philosophy will commit itself to universalizing methods (2019, p. 153). Of interest is how Burkhart compares whether other ancient philosophers fall into the same trap. Citing Heraclitus' account of *logos*, he rejects Aristotle's response to that account:¹⁹

'Aristotle notices the ambiguity in these words. Even in the first sentence, the context of "forever" is unclear, he pointed out. It is not clear if "forever" is referencing "being" or "prove" (*Rhetoric* 1407b11-18). Aristotle regarded this ambiguity as a weakness in Heraclitus's thought, but does not see what seems like Heraclitus's purposeful attempt at layering complex and dynamic meaning in his words... The spoken word is both forever in locality and forever incomprehensible out of locality. Heraclitus, even in the fragmentary nature of what is written and in part because of it—at least in the context of any attempted abstract, delocalized framing of the meaning of his words—displays perhaps the clearest understanding of epistemic locality of any philosopher in the Western canon' (2019, p. 155).

Burkhart, through his emphasis on locality, is able to rehabilitate aspects of ancient thought. Whether or not Burkhart effectively captures the debate Aristotle is inserting himself into, is secondary to what is demonstrated in this passage.²⁰ The primary importance

¹⁸ We can also connect this to problems of incommensurability or how language can fail to communicate the scope of a meaning when translated. See Meissner (2023) for an application of this in Indigenous philosophy. Relevant, but not explored in this article, is how Meissner's conception of 'world travelling' might help to navigate the claims made about world philosophy in the previous section.

¹⁹ This is not the first time someone has pointed to Heraclitus as an instance of a model for decolonial philosophy. See Nkrumah (1970) for an earlier version of this.

²⁰ To be clear, this is not an endorsement of what Burkhart thinks is going on with Aristotle and Heraclitus. I find many of the claims he makes about ancient philosophy to be unconvincing and ungrounded.

is the way Indigenous philosophy offers Burkhart a route to show us new perspectives on a non-Indigenous philosophical tradition. Asking what ancient philosophers have to say about locality and relationships grounds questions within an Indigenous framework. In this sense, having a flexible account of philosophy that wants to account for all possible ranges of human thought, opens more doors even within the traditional sphere. We can see how thoughts on place or relationships have changed rather than asking for an account of progress. While still critical of Western philosophy, this analysis from Burkhart provides a contrast to the brief engagements from scholars of ancient philosophy in the first section. Rather than offering a comparative approach between an Indigenous concept and an Ancient Greek philosophical concept, Burkhart demonstrates what can be generated by adopting locality as a method of philosophy.

How Burkhart approaches his critique of Western philosophy by beginning from the Greeks is in tune with his former mentor Vine Deloria Jr. For instance, Vine Deloria Jr. in *Power and Place* repeatedly criticizes Plato and Aristotle as originators for a detached and universal account of the world: Plato through his emphasis on forms, and in Aristotle's use of essences for metaphysical explanations (Deloria and Wildcat, 2001). What I want to suggest here is that despite the strength of critiques levied at Greek and Roman philosophy for its influence, Burkhart's conception of locality is not antithetical to discussing ancient sources, even if those ancient sources are a part of the Western tradition. Indeed, as shown above, Burkhart can offer new interpretations of ancient material even if that is not the primary goal for the development of his concept of locality.

Here, then, I return to the distinction between thought and philosophy made multiple times in this article. If it is helpful to think of philosophy as distinct from the idea of it as an academic discipline, then we might think that what Burkhart and Cordova offer us is a way to approach 'ancient' philosophy. Engaging with ancient material on the basis of their thought invites and makes room for applications of Indigenous perspectives. This then reverses the relationship between academic philosophy and ancient philosophy's status as a philosophical endeavor. Instead of ancient philosophy and Indigenous philosophy representing two geographically distinct areas of philosophy, where both are imagined as in the temporally distant past, Indigenous philosophy becomes a method of engaging with a specific (or localized) area of the past and asks how this might be significant for our readings of an ancient thinker.

This section presented two views on Indigenous philosophy from Indigenous philosophers: in both instances, Indigenous philosophy is viewed as an act that goes beyond the confines of academic disciplinarity. Cordova teaches us how and where philosophy can happen, whether a classroom or a kitchen table.²¹ Burkhart, I argue, inverts the anxieties about the status of ancient philosophy discussed at the outset of the article, and shows us how to think not only within our own context but also how to ask and seek out that locality in other sources. These are only two Indigenous philosophers, representing a brief and

What I do find convincing is the idea that we should be considering different routes and entry points to what philosophy is and how new questions can be opened. For instance, I think Aristotle is cast in a very uninteresting way throughout his book, but the interesting thing would be to explore, using what Burkhart has offered here, if an account of Aristotle as someone interested in locality and community can be developed, what that would look like, and how that account gets changed in the reception of Aristotle.

²¹ See Lustilla (2025) for further thoughts on applying Indigenous philosophy in and outside of the classroom.

partial account of Indigenous philosophy. Kyle Whyte, to offer a further example, demonstrates and utilizes conceptions of locality and kinship in asking deeply philosophical questions, as evidenced in his chapter ‘What do Indigenous Knowledges do for Indigenous Peoples?’ (2018). In the same vein as Dabashi, many other Indigenous thinkers might deserve the title of ‘philosopher’. I direct philosophical readers to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s new work *A Theory of Water* (2025), which demonstrates a deep concern with ideas of change. Likewise, scholar and cultural critic Nick Estes in his work *Our History is the Future* (2019) provides an ethics of resistance in his discussion of the Dakota Access Pipeline. I end with this emphasis on current Indigenous thinkers that we might want to call philosophers because I take this point to be the more urgent one to make. If part of the issue with contrasting ‘ancient’ and Indigenous philosophy is that it gestures to a distant past, then I want to give space to where contemporary Indigenous thought is happening, at the very least in academic spaces.

Conclusion or How is this Article about Classics?

The title of this conclusion is a riff on the article by Kirstie Dotson entitled ‘How is this Paper about Philosophy?’ (2012). Dotson discusses many of the same themes discussed here, above all that academic philosophy as a discipline is not a space that is conducive for diverse practitioners of philosophy (2012, p. 4). The critiques she levies at academic philosophy are precisely against the field’s demands for ‘philosophical rigor’ which do not leave room for anything that does not obviously appear as philosophy (2012, p.7). The solution for academic philosophy is to develop a ‘culture of praxis’ where different methods and modes of inquiry are encouraged, even if they would appear incongruous under a more traditional framework (2012, pp.16-17). I end with this final reflection to show, first, that the critique of academic philosophy I have offered here is not new. Dotson, Mills, and Dabashi all offer a critique of the aims of ‘philosophy’ in their own ways. The critiques we have seen of philosophy as a discipline sit easily with the critiques also levied against Classics. The story that we have looked at here, tracing the contours of the tensions surrounding opening up and redefining philosophy, is closely akin to the debates currently taking place within Classics. Following Mathura Umachandran and Marchella Ward’s introduction in *Critical Ancient World Studies* (2024), we might find that the arguments for simply expanding Classics are, at best, the same as the arguments for World philosophy. Ancient philosophy sits at the intersection of these two disciplines, and for that reason, special attention should be paid to how the practice of ‘ancient philosophy’ is justified in a modern context, and who is marginalized in that context. I have shown that there is some desire by philosophers to maintain ancient philosophy as an integral part of Western philosophy. Even when the relationship between the two is contested, the Greeks and Romans are nevertheless comfortably placed into ‘Club philosophy’. Moreover, we have seen how concerns about expanding who is included in the History of Philosophy has often marginalized non-western forms of philosophy. There have been some violent examples of this exclusion, in the instance of Rorty discussed in the first section.

In picking apart the roots of this exclusion, I have considered various critiques of Western philosophy as well as solutions proposed. I considered both Mills’ and Dabashi’s stances on philosophy as opposed to thought and showed how both provide an account of philosophy that exists outside the realm of justifying and appealing to Western philosophy as the primary basis for including non-Western philosophy. Starting with Charles Mills and his advocacy for Black philosophy can help us offer a comprehensive account of race without

falling into the universalizing tendencies of Western philosophy. Through these arguments, Mills and Dabashi go against the trend of other solutions to the problem of exclusion in philosophy. Here, we looked at the trend of World philosophy and the arguments for a multicultural approach to teaching and studying philosophy. Finally, I argued that Dabashi's move from philosophy to thought offers a variety of benefits, but non-Western scholars might still want the dignity of philosophy, albeit not philosophy as done by Western standards.

It is this intervention I have left readers with an introduction to Cordova's account of philosophy which emphasizes how relationality, locality, and change over progress can overcome some of the criticisms of attempts at a multi-cultural philosophy. Most importantly, Cordova gives us a route to think with Indigenous philosophy. Likewise, Burkhardt's most recent work showcases an argument which applies Indigenizing philosophy to ancient Greek works based on similar tenets. We might close by taking heed of the lessons offered both by Cordova's story of the elder offering the advice to engwaamizin and Burkhardt's story of Coyote: be careful. This care extends to how philosophy is constructed, who might be excluded from it, and how we carefully evaluate our sources.

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