

The Problem(s) of Theory and Theory Production in Africana Studies

A review by Karanja Keita Carroll

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Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds. *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006. xiii + 321 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN: 1594511470.

At the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979, Audre Lorde argued “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). By “the master’s tools,” Lorde was specifically referring to “the fruits” of “racist patriarchy” (pp. 110-111). These are the words that have inspired this collection of essays which engage the notion of theory in Black/Afro-American/African American/Pan-African/Africana Studies. Lewis Gordon, a Temple University professor of religion and philosophy, and Jane Anna Gordon, a lecturer of political science at Temple University, have taken Lorde to task, arguing that the master’s tools need not dismantle the master’s house. In the introduction to this text, they argue that we follow the master’s “lead, transcending rather than dismantling Western ideas through building our own houses of thought” (Gordon & Gordon, 2006, p. ix), and through the building of our own houses, we will then displace the “hegemony of the master’s house” (p. ix). Thus the editors have compiled eight chapters which attempt to take up this task.

Gordon and Gordon argue that the role of theory within Africana Studies deserves attention. While not at the expense of empirical research, they correctly assert that “[i]mportant as empirical work has been and continues to be, without interpretation, even at the level of the methods used for organizing the research and gathering data, such work would be meaningless” (p. x). Therefore given the role of theory in all aspects of research, its place within Africana Studies is undeniable. Gordon and Gordon continue by asserting that “[t]heory is not only a tool of the master” (p. xi). Since, “the master” does not hold “theory” under lock and key, scholars within Africana Studies must develop relevant and applicable theories to accurately understand the Africana experience.

Lewis Gordon, author of the first chapter in this volume, titled “African-American Philosophy, Race and Geography of Reason,” develops arguments found in the introduction. He begins by discussing the importance of philosophy to Africana Studies as the most important subject/content area that can provide the proper avenue for theory production.

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Building upon these arguments Gordon adds that all too many times when theorizing about the Africana experience, scholars rely upon white theoreticians to make sense of Africana reality. Gordon argues that instead of using white theoreticians we should rely upon “the resources of thought offered by Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, V. Y. Mudimbe, James Cone, Sylvia Wynter, George Lamming, Else Goveia, Angela Y. Davis, and Paget Henry...” (p. 31). While this is true, this volume holds a limited number of examples that use this approach to theoretical work within Africana Studies. In spite of this disconnection, Gordon has provided a philosophical lens to understand theory development within Africana Studies, and thus students of Western and Africana philosophy will find this essay cumulative and directive for future research.

In chapter two, “Toward a Critique of Continental Reason: Africana Studies and the Decolonization of Imperial Cartographies in the Americas,” Nelson Maldonado-Torres attempts to critically engage the arguments of Cornel West, while at the same time discuss the role Africana Studies can play in helping to end the debate between analytical and continental philosophy. Maldonado-Torres’ critique of the continental/analytical philosophy debate is grounded in his critique of geographical loyalty. The notion of geographical loyalty is relevant to Africana Studies, and this is evident through Maldonado-Torres’ incorporation of Latin America in his discussion of the discipline.

Kenneth Danzinger Knies, in “The Idea of Post-European Science: An Essay on the Phenomenology and Africana Studies” (chapter 3), attempts to reinterpret Africana Studies as a post-European science based upon Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. According to Knies, post-European sciences are the intellectual fruits of the Black Freedom Movement (Africana Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, etc.), which “contain an animating *telos* that points toward a radical rethinking of theory itself, a rethinking capable of drawing of science beyond a myopic closure that we will call ‘European’.” Furthermore, specifically referring to Africana Studies, “as a post-European science, it [Africana Studies] is bound up with a turning point in the life of reason, a turning point that concerns the very possibility of achieving rigorous theory” (pp. 85-86). While these assessments are accurate, Africana Studies prior to it ever being interpreted as a “post-European science” or was bound to a Husserlian interpretation, came from a critical rethinking and questioning of normative (ie. western/European) thought in regards to Africana people and humanity, by extension.ⁱ Still, within his essay Knies effectively engages questions of disciplinarity within Africana Studies through a phenomenological lens by suggesting that scholars within Africana Studies must suspend prior claims of disciplinarity and move towards a rethinking that is not disciplinary bound.

In “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desetre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project*,” (chapter 4) Sylvia Wynter has clearly articulated the problematic of the Western imposition of beingness upon non-Europeans. Furthermore, she attempts to show the relationship between this project and the rise of Black Studies. Wynter argues that with the development of the Black Arts, Black Aesthetic and Black Studies movements, we saw an attempt at re-envisioning who African people were within the United States. These movements effectively argued that the conceptual frameworks used within the Western/European world to understand African people were inadequate. Therefore, architects of these movements argued that we needed to reexamine notions of art, aesthetics, and also knowledge and education from an African/Black vantage point. This was the initial mission and thrust of Black Studies, according to Wynter. However, with the neoconservative movement growing in the 1970s and coming to complete fruition in the early 1980s, the original thrusts of Black Studies was lost. Wynter is at her strongest when she clearly and repeatedly states that what has produced itself as African American Studies today is an ethnicized creation of Black Studies which is not reflective of the original thrust and intention of scholars and students who argued for Black Studies in the 1960s. While Wynter is able to articulate these ideas essential for a proper understanding of current manifestations of African Studies, the majority of her sixty-two page chapter is of no real consequence to the advancement of African Studies. In fact, the majority of her text attempts to engage the manner in which African people have been dehumanized, a fact which has been articulated by others.ⁱⁱ However, unlike many of the chapters within this text, Wynter approaches her topic with clear grounding and knowledge of African Studies.

Stephen Nathan Haymes, author of “Pedagogy and the Philosophical Anthropology of African-American Slave Culture” (chapter 5), attempts to investigate the role of “slave culture” among African Americans as a form of pedagogy that taught humanness. The culturally-specific pedagogy of enslaved Africans in America, as Haymes argues, was more than just a process related to intelligence, hence it was connected to a process of existing within an anti-African world. Haymes touches upon the importance of culture, and knowledge of one’s heritage as a means of affirming one’s humanness. As Haymes argues, “African American slave culture contributes to defining what ought to be the dehumanizing aims of an education for a suffering people that have experienced the underside of European and European-American modernity” (p. 189).

Chapter six, by co-editor Jane Anna Gordon, entitled “Double Consciousness and the Problem of Political Legitimacy,” attempts to rectify the problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s notion of the general through Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness. By laying out the problem of Rousseau’s notion of generality, she uses Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness in order to make sense of it.

While this essay is written clearly, there seems to be a serious disconnect between Rosseau, Du Bois and Africana Studies. Of all the chapters in this volume, this chapter seems to be almost completely irrelevant to the advancing of theory and theory production in Africana Studies.

David Ross Fryer, in “On the Possibilities of Posthumanism, or How to Think Queerly in an Antiblack World” (chapter 7), does an eloquent job of interrogating normative assumptions in an attempt to critique a radical substantiation of the idea of “queer” through a phenomenological lens. Fryer, as a self-defined “ethicist” asks penetrating questions which harkens back to the fundamental questions that a scholar of Africana Studies must put on the table. Stating, “I argue from the perspective that questions of the *ought* are fundamentally bound up with question of the *is*. In fact, I would say that it is precisely in the *is* that we find the *ought*; that it, is precisely describing human reality, as we live it, that we not only see the origin of the ethical imperative but also learn how we ought to act in particular situations” (p. 228). Taking such a critical stance in consciously attempting to effect the human situation speaks to a component of the original intent of Africana Studies. Furthermore, the manner in which Fryer lays out his argument is the most effective of all the contributions to this text.

Maulana Karenga, author of the concluding chapter to this volume entitled “Philosophy in the African Tradition of Resistance: Issues of Human Freedom and Human Flourishing,” clearly grounds his discussion of “Philosophy in the African Tradition of Resistance” within Africana philosophy and Africana Studies. Karenga attempts to investigate the African philosophical tradition as the basis for making change in the African, and general human, condition. By relying upon the intellectual history of Africana philosophy through the Kemetic and Yoruba traditions, Karenga summarizes two sets of African philosophical principles. By concluding with a practical mode of action, Karenga’s contribution fits the notion of praxis within an Africana Studies framework, by providing direct solutions which Africana people and by extension, humanity can utilize in the process of creating a better world. While aspects of this essay are reflective of arguments Karenga has made in previous publications, his inclusion within this volume attempts to directly create theory based upon Lewis Gordon’s initial arguments regarding the need to rely upon the Africana philosophical tradition when developing theories in Africana Studies.

Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon have compiled chapters which they believe exemplify the current discussion of theory in Africana Studies. While this collection of essays does reflect current thought by Africana people and/or about Africana experiences, its relevance to Africana Studies must be called into question.

First, nomenclature in reference to the discipline of Africana Studies is unclear. Africana Studies, is not only referred to as African American/Black/Afro-American Studies, which is reflective of current trends in the discipline.

It is also referred to as Human Studies, Prospero Studies and Caliban Studies, which while reflective of work produced by Lewis Gordon and his colleaguesⁱⁱⁱ, only minimally reflects current discussions within the discipline. Secondly, the majority of the chapters seem to discuss Africana Studies as an afterthought, with no clear knowledge base of Africana Studies. For instance, Lewis Gordon and Kenneth Danziger Knies suggest that we should do away with disciplinary boundaries within Africana Studies. But this is an old and reoccurring argument within the discipline.^{iv} Additionally, when Gordon and Knies advance this idea neither rely upon previous arguments of key thinkers in the discipline in order to substantiate their position. Furthermore, in their attempt at critiquing allegiance to a particular discipline, it is interesting that all of the essays except Karenga's are clearly grounded in Western philosophy.

Finally, if we revisit the arguments of Audre Lorde, in no way did she state that we should do away with "theory," it was the "master's" theory which she was specifically referring to. Another reading of Lorde's profound assertion is that the master's theories/concepts/models/paradigms, etc. will not change the condition of the oppressed and the creation of theories based upon the Africana (and non-European) experience are essential for any type of freedom among the oppressed. While Lewis Gordon pays lip service to this idea in the first essay in this volume, the majority of the chapters are in a constant dialogue and grounding within Western philosophical thought.

While this text will be useful for students and scholars of Africana philosophy and Western philosophy, specifically Existential, Hermeneutical and Phenomenological thought, it is only minimally relevant to Africana Studies. Africana Studies requires of its scholars and contributors knowledge of the complete intellectual history and development of the discipline in order to provide historically accurate and culturally relevant contributions which will contribute to the initial mission of Africana Studies, which is to effectively change the conditions (social, mental, physical, economic, etc.) of Africana people from a relative frame of reference. In conclusion, Audre Lorde deserves the last word, for she clearly speaks to the real problematic of the master's tools and work reflective of them: "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to women [and by extension Africana people] who still define the master's house as their only source of support*" (Lorde, p. 112, author's emphasis).

Notes

1 See Daudi Ajani Ya Azibo, "Articulating the Distinction Between Black Studies and The Study of Blacks." *The Afrocentric Scholar*, 1, no. 1 (1992): 64-97; William McClendon, "Black Studies: Education for Liberation." *The Black Scholar*, 6, no. 1 (1974); Russell L. Adams, "Black Studies Perspectives." *Journal of Negro Education*, 46, 2 (1977): 99-117.

2 For a holistic and culturally relevant assessment of the European process of dehumanization see Marimba Ani's *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994.

3 See Lewis Gordon, *Existensia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C. L.R. James*. Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997.

4 See Preston Wilcox, "Black Studies as an Academic Discipline." *Negro Digest*, 19, no. 5 (1970): 75-87; Karla Spurlock, "Toward the Evolution of a Unitary Discipline: Maximizing the Interdisciplinary Concept in African/Afro-American Studies." *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 1, no. 3 (1977): 224-228; Daudi Ajani Ya Azibo, "Articulating the Distinction Between Black Studies and The Study of Blacks." *The Afrocentric Scholar*, 1, no. 1 (1992): 64-97; James Stewart, "Reaching for Higher Ground: Toward an Understanding of Black/Africana Studies." *The Afrocentric Scholar*, 1, no. 1 (1992): 1-63.

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