

Reiland Rabaka's Africana Critical Theory: A Genealogy of Asantean Afrocentric Sources and Influences

by

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Abstract

This work will examine Reiland Rabaka's theoretical construction "Africana Critical Theory," (ACT) employing an illumination of Molefi Asante's conceptual idea Afrocentricity. This work will use a genealogical/archaeological approach as its methodology of exploration. Rabaka's body of work is a critical part of the Africana Studies enterprise and must be clearly understood in its birth. Thus, this exploration seeks to reveal and highlight the Asantean Afrocentric sources that Rabaka brought forth to define and strengthen his development of ACT.

Rabaka in Context

Reiland Rabaka the leading proponent of what he operationalizes as Africana Critical Theory. He is currently professor and chair of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado. He lectures to both domestic and international audiences and critiques broadly on topics including Africana Philosophy, Feminism and Hip-Hop scholarship. Since Rabaka received his graduate training from the Temple School of Afrocentricity, this work will explore and illuminate the influences Asantean Afrocentric thought had on the development of Africana Critical Theory or ACT as it will be referred to in this work going forward. Clearly, this is not to suggest that Rabaka relied solely on this line of thinking (which he did not), as his writings reflect, but this work will *singularly* isolate and examine Asantean Afrocentric thought products as a backdrop for exploration.

Epistemological Grounding

Rabaka contends that Africana thought is best suited to interrogate Africana critical reality. He writes, (2009)

...it is my belief that the enigmatic issues of the contemporary world are illuminated by black radicals in unique ways in which they have not been and are not now by Marxists, feminists, pragmatists, existentialists, phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, deconstructionists, poststructuralists, postmodernists, critical pedagogues, liberation theologians, and (neo) liberals, among others. (p. 3)

In tone and tenor Rabaka's ACT (2006) agrees with Tillotson's (2011) assertion that to differing degrees these ideas are *Agency Reduction Formations* which are, "Any system of thought that distracts, neutralizes or reduces the need and desire for assertive collective agency by African Americans" (p. 60). One can think of agency not just in terms of human freedom and ideas of race, but also in terms of critical theory and collective intellectual currency. Rabaka suggests that there is a political and ideological nature concerning the choice of what theorists many European intellectuals choose to do their work in the field of critical theory. Rabaka (2006) writes:

The paradigms and points of departure for critical theorists vary depending on the theorists' intellectual interests and political persuasions. For instance, many European critical theorists' turn to Hegel, Marx, Freud, and/or the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Habermas, Horkheimer, and Marcuse), because they understand these thinkers' thought and texts to speak in special ways to modern/and or "postmodern" life worlds and lived experiences. (p. 134)

Rabaka clearly understands that in the main Eurocentric thought producers rely upon their own intellectual traditions to reinforce and shore up their arguments. Alternatively, it is with this understanding that I illuminate ACT and explore the following passages written by Rabaka (2006):

My work, Africana critical theory, uses the thought and texts of Africana intellectual ancestors as critical theoretical paradigms and points of departure because so much of their thought prefigures and provides a foundation for contemporary Africana philosophy specifically. (p. 134)

However, the following passage by Rabaka (2006) sends a different message to the reader:

Critical theory is not about or *should not* be about allegiance to intellectual; ancestors and/or ancient schools of thought, but about using all (without regard to race, gender, class, and or sexual orientation) accumulated radical thought and revolutionary practices in the interest of liberation and social transformation.
(p. 135)

What is difficult to understand is why Rabaka confesses allegiance and loyalty to the intellectual works of the Africana tradition, but at the same time maintains that it is not in the best interest of liberation and social transformation to do so. Clearly, he is suggesting that the Africana scholars employing the Eurocentric tradition not continue do this. Rabaka also contends that philosopher Cornel West offered an outline for theorizing ACT.

West (1982) writes,

The object of inquiry for Afro-American critical thought is the past and present, the doings and the sufferings of African people in the United States. Rather than a scientific discipline or field of study, it is a genre of writing, a textuality, a mode of discourse that interprets, describes, and evaluates Afro-American life in order comprehensively to understand and effectively to transform it. It is not concerned with “foundations” or transcendental “grounds” but with how to build its language in such a way that the configuration of paragraphs themselves create a textuality and distinctive discourse which are a material force for Afro-American freedom. (p. 15)

This is a context for discovery for Rabaka as he explores Cornel West in his development of ACT.

Methodological Concerns

Rabaka’s choice of the aforementioned passage appears to be in alignment on some levels with his theoretical basis for ACT. However, it has yet to be clearly demonstrated by West in his works that he is committed to the intellectual traditions of Africana people.

West believes that critical thought concerning Africana people is not a scientific discipline or field of study, but a *genre* of writing that describes and evaluates black life. This is far too limiting a treatment for the history of a people whose unique position in the world is definitely worthy of much more than a “genre.” It appears that West is suggesting that the discipline of Africana Studies is not necessary in this regard. From this statement one could surmise that West is attempting to reduce the critical, historical analysis of Africana people to a simple genre. This is reductionist when considering the historiography and contributions of Africana people to human achievement and perhaps Rabaka will examine West’s position more closely in future work.

In the public sphere West has offered the cloudy proposition that black people are Nihilistic, which is a distinct value judgment of an entire race of people writ large. This is an important moment because it may help to explain West’s belief on some level why the study of Africana critical thought can be reduced to “a genre.” Rabaka’s reliance on West to give weight to his position is troublesome because West seeks a position of absolutism concerning Africana people. The majority of Cornel West’s works have been drowned in the mystical waters of “universalism,” which is native to Eurocentric scholars and the resulting scholarship that is consumed with *particularistic* (Vis a Vis) European intellectual thought.

Alternatively, in another voice and using Cornel West’s own words (1982) one can clearly locate West inside of his enduring European thought dependency when he wrote:

Afro-American philosophy expresses the particular American variation of European modernity that Afro-Americans helped shape in this country and must contend with in the future. While it might be possible to articulate a competing Afro-American philosophy based principally on African norms and notions, it is likely that the result would be theoretically thin. (p. 24)

In his own words this passage illustrates West’s ideas and appraisals concerning any work generated by the Africana tradition that does not siphon its intellectual energy from European thought as being thin. Perhaps, West’s knowledge of the African philosophical tradition is to use his words “thin.” By using this passage Rabaka illuminates and exposes West’s (to be generous here) perhaps subconscious anti-Africana intellectual stances; unless of course when West is speaking of Black music. In that area West presents a more appreciative reflection. This passage is well suited to Rabaka’s position, and adds weight and clarity to his argument.

Distinguishing Characteristics and Orientation

Rabaka (2006) writes,

What distinguishes and helps to define Africana critical theory is its emphasis on the often overlooked continental and diasporan African contributions to critical theory. It draws from critical thought and philosophical traditions rooted in the realities of continental and diasporan African history, culture, and struggle--- which, in other words, is to say that Africana critical theory inherently employs an Afrocentric methodological orientation that highlights and accents Africana theories and philosophies “born of struggle” Asante, 1988, 1990, 1998... (p. 133-134)

Above, Rabaka uses three works of Molefi Kete Asante to show his relationship to Asantean Afrocentric methodology. Asante is the leading authority on Asantean Afrocentric theory and a clear choice for Rabaka, because the issue of intellectual agency is paramount for Africana people on a global scale. Afrocentricity is concerned with the centered place of people of African descent. It requires that Africana people see themselves through the lens of their native land, history and culture. Afrocentricity challenges the deep structural aspects that unify hegemonic anti-egalitarian Eurocentric cultural thought and behavior. This understanding by Rabaka can be seen and exemplified by Asante (1990) who argues: “The aim of the Africologist is to make the world more meaningful to those who live in it and to create spaces for human understanding” (p. 28). Afrocentric theory is pluralistic not hierarchal and will produce respect and understanding of all scholarly endeavors because it is not asking for Afrocentricity to be universal, but for it to be front and center when examining people of African descent.

Clearly, Rabaka understands this and by asking that Africana ideas and intellectual production be at the center of inquiry for Africana people; ACT in harmony with the Afrocentric idea can dig deep into the repository of Africana scholarship throughout the ages and add to the corpus of critical theory for some time to come. Asante (1990) writes, “Africology builds upon theoretical principles outlined by previous scholars. Any intelligent selection of a field of inquiry or a question for research must be based on a theory. The fundamental theoretical basis for Africology are derived from the Afrocentric perspective” (p. 30). Rabaka is astute in choosing this work to shore up his conceptual framework for ACT, because it gives clear messages to the reader concerning the idea that his work is rooted in the struggle of Africana people.

Rabaka is aware that the reality of Afrocentric theory resonates from the Africana intellectual tradition in terms of collective intellectual agency. He uses the book *Kemet Afrocentricity and Knowledge* to demonstrate how critical theory has been influenced by Afrocentricity. In response to Eurocentric philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's view of the African's place in world history Asante (1990) writes:

In *Philosophy of History* he explained that Africa proper was the territory south of the Sahara; European Africa was the territory north of the Sahara; Egypt was the part of Africa connected to Asia. This division is arbitrary and has no validity in point of fact. Africa is geographically and culturally, due to natural barriers, more continental than Europe. There is neither Africa north of the Sahara nor south of the Sahara as Hegel claimed; the Sahara is Africa and human populations have inhabited the Sahara for thousands of years. (p. 33)

This passage, by Asante is clearly critical theory and attests to its impact because of the nature of the challenge. According to the Frankfurt School established at the University of Frankfurt in Germany the term critical theory is generally understood as social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. Afrocentric theory by its own definition lives in the scholarly universe to critique and change society by centering the place of Africana people in all inquiry surrounding Africana existence. Rabaka wants the reader to further understand other definitions of critical theory when he speaks of Steven Best and writes "Finally, in his study of Marx, Foucault, and Habermas's philosophies of history and contributions to critical theory" (Rabaka, 2006, p. 144), Best (1996) writes, "...in the most general sense, designating simply a critical social theory, that is, a social theory critical of present forms of domination, injustice, coercion, and inequality" (p. xvii). By including other voices Rabaka opens up the idea of critical theory as an Idea of human agency. Rabaka makes it clear that he understands that Best (1996) does not "...limit the term to refer to only the Frankfurt School" (p. xvii). By making the world aware of the larger meanings and definition put forth by Best, Rabaka fully allows Afrocentricity to flourish without the confines of the Frankfurt Schools limited definition of critical theory. By using Best's understanding, Rabaka allows Afrocentric theory to illuminate on all things that are not in harmony with goodness for the human condition.

Philosophical Platform

Rabaka believes that ACT should come from the realities and struggles of Africana people. It is clear that the most pervasive struggle for Africana people is the fight against institutional, structural and systemic anti-egalitarianism also known in many quarters as global white supremacy. In order to understand this phenomenon, it must first be deconstructed; Asante (1990) states,

The valorization of whiteness is profoundly a five-hundred-year-old Eurocentric enterprise. To engage in a discussion about white supremacy is to employ a term used by whites to legitimize white control over others or to speak about control exercised by whites over others since the 1600's. Both are political uses of the term "white supremacy." Since white supremacy, in a biological sense does not exist, writers who use the term are using a theoretical construct based on economic, social, and political situations enforced by the military power or the threat of violence. (p. 183)

Rabaka again is on target because this passage deconstructs so-called white supremacy and at the same time identifies a moment of struggle. Rabaka has argued that he believes Africana critical theory evolves from the struggle of African people and this response from Asante is in alignment with this thesis.

Rabaka (2006) writes,

Africana critical theory does not acquiesce, or give priority, and special privilege to European history, culture, and thought. It turns to the long overlooked thought and texts of women and men of African descents who have developed and contributed radical thought and revolutionary practices that could possibly aid us in our endeavors to continuously create a theory critical of domination and discrimination in contemporary culture and society. (p. 136)

This passage suggests that the intellectual well from which ACT draws its meanings from is Africana people, being located as subject and not object. This dovetails and is in direct positional sequence with the basic tenets of Afrocentric theory and praxis. Rabaka mentions the revolutionary practices that are inherent in ACT. Asante (2003) speaks to this idea in his work, he writes,

But it was reading Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* that really moved Garveyism toward the U.S.A. and the creation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He became resolute that he must help to make the black man's nation. By 1914, Garvey was sure that he could unite all of the black peoples of the world into one great body to establish a country and government (Garvey 1969). His program offered these seven steps:

1. Awakening and uniting all Africans
2. Changing the thinking of the aroused to potential
3. Channeling emotional energies toward constructive racial interests
4. Mass sacrificial work
5. Through education in science and industry and character building, stress mass education
6. Prepare nationalists to run nations
7. Keep the young nations together after they were formed (p. 16-17)

Asante's use of Garvey's ideas in the text helps the reader to understand the direct correlation between what Rabaka has termed "revolutionary practices" and ACT. ACT according to Rabaka's theoretical premise, must have application and not only theory or it is of no value to African people and all of humanity. According to Rabaka, ACT is critical of domination and discrimination in contemporary culture and society. One of the main ideological thrusts of Afrocentric theory and Asante's work centers around critiques of domination. Rabaka's choice of this text (Asante, 2003) further illustrates this connection in this passage:

Enslavement of the mind is the most pernicious kind of enslavement because the person will never be able to see clearly for himself or herself. Such a person runs after assimilations as if it will resolve all mental problems; it is the beginning of mental death. Breaking the mental chains only occurs when a person learns to take two sets of notes on almost everything encountered in the Western world. (p. 52 – 53).

This passage illuminates the critique of domination that Rabaka consistently argues for. As part of his ideational framework Rabaka is forthright in asking his supportive works to echo his position in the development of his theoretical construction.

Rabaka brings forth ACT as a theory that examines its own aims, objectives, positions, and methods; while simultaneously refining and revising itself to reflect contemporary realities. ACT is in concert with Afrocentricity; because its methodology and praxis stand firm in its use and defense of African inspired intellectual production. In this regard Asante (1998) argues:

Any attempt to undermine the construction of a racist ideology of dominance is necessarily challenging to a racist society. The Afrocentric idea does not seek to revise the structure of domination and oppression of African people; it seeks to produce a more humane response to the cultural and political phenomena confronted in Western society by African people by completely altering the process of dominance. (p. 42-43)

This passage gives a long lensed view of the Afrocentric idea. It is central to ACT and gives clarity to the substance of the theoretical framework that Rabaka espouses in his work. This excerpt displays the finer points of Afrocentricity and fully contextualizes the model from which Rabaka drew a portion of his intellectual thrust.

Conclusion

Through the works of Molefi Asante I have engaged the genealogy of Asantean Afrocentric sources and its particular influences on Rabaka's notion of Africana Critical Theory; with the purpose of advancing the discourse on an important aspect of the Africological project. The aim of this work was to explore the epistemological and methodological ground that Rabaka's theory stands on as it relates to the Temple School of Afrocentricity. In the 21st century, in order for the Africana intellectual corpus to continue its robust and muscular growth, there must be innovative thinkers such as Reiland Rabaka who plow new scholarly ground, while at the same time not abandoning his early intellectual moorings. This must be done by other 21st century Africana scholars without hesitation or apology. In the final analysis what was discovered here is the animating principle that undergirds Rabaka's work, which is his enduring fidelity to the Africana intellectual tradition. Erstwhile, as academics we have trusted our existing intellectual forbearers to pave the way for a new generations of emerging ideas, so therefore, this contemporary moment demands that now we respond in kind and the work of Reiland Rabaka has done that.

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