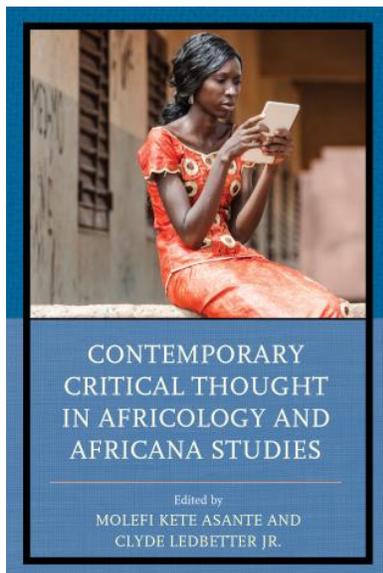


Critical Thought in Africology and Africana Studies: A Protracted Review

A review of Asante, Molefi Kete and Clyde Ledbetter Jr., eds. *Contemporary Critical Thought in Africology and Africana Studies*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016, xxi, pp.218, 24 cm, index [pp.213-215], biographical references, ISBN: 978-1-4985-3070-S, LCCN: 2015043484, OCLC: 925498172 by Itibari M, Zulu (editor, *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*).



This book (a part of the ‘Critical Africana Studies: African, African American, and Caribbean Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Studies’ series edited by Reiland Rabaka) via thirteen articles (seven by co-editor Molefi Kete Asante) argues that the Afrocentric study of African phenomena represents an oasis of innovation in progressive venues and that the goal of the work is to spark further debate, critical interpretations and extensions, and to reform/reformulate the way critical thought is approached. Secondly, it offers new interpretations, analysis, and challenges to predominant frameworks in diverse areas like philosophy, social justice, literature, and history. The first co-editor is Molefi Kete Asante, the architect and chair of the Department of Africology and African American Studies at Temple University (co-editor and the founding editor, *The Journal of Black Studies*), and the second editor, Clyde Ledbetter Jr. is

an instructor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Science at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (Cheyney, Pennsylvania) and a 2013 graduate of the doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple University.

In the introduction, the co-editors waste no time making their argument that it has been the practice of Western social sciences (and to a lesser extent the humanities) to ignore theories advanced by African or African American studies scholars as they are absent from recommend reading lists, and thus, “... one would find little information suggesting African American studies scholars as theorist or philosophers” and are regularly taught at universities in the U.S., Africa or Europe (pp. vii). Nevertheless, the co-editors aim to showcase some of the new thought from African American scholars originating outside a Eurocentric and uncritical neoliberal capitalist paradigm that does not question or establish responsibility (pp. viii).

The book begins with a 2013 presentation by Asante at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa on decolonizing university education in Africa, saying: African mental health and liberation depends on an ability to reassert the dignity of the foundations of knowledge set by our ancestors (paraphrasing Frantz Fanon/Michael Onyebuchi Eze, p.3); a total reassertion of Africa at the center of knowledge discovery and dissemination is needed in Africa in order to awaken a new response to the human condition (p.4); knowledge in Africa must begin with a Kemetic-Nubian axis for fundamental references; and thus, every concept of European colonial control must be thoroughly vetted. Such a critique is needed in Africa and throughout the African world community as there is a Eurocentric ongoing battle for the minds of people. Asante is one of a very few African American scholars based in the U.S. able to offer such a critique to people and institutions based on the continent, without much controversy suggesting foreign internal interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign community/nation.

Next, Daryl B. Harris of Howard University, in an article that originally appeared in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 2005, argues that the elite-centered postmodern Blackness phenomenon in African American intellectual political thought is a precarious turn away from relevance, and thus, an expression of the individualistic ethos of the European worldview. Hence, regardless of the postmodern Blackness phenomenon position on neutralizing African culture and unity, ancient and highly developed African communal value is based on unity (p.21); and that Black postmodern efforts to devalue Africa aids the Eurocentric canon to diminish the African story. In this condemnation, Harris also rightfully points out that the postmodern Blackness phenomenon is linked to the notion of white supremacy (the belief that white people are superior to all other people, especially people of African heritage, and that they should therefore dominate). Harris' examination stands alone in scholarly discourse on African American cultural/political thought as Black and other anti-Black unity and culture proponents (i.e., Paul Gilroy, Michael Eric Dyson, Kwame Anthony Appiah, etc.) engage themselves in discussion while bell hooks, perhaps the originator of "postmodern Blackness" in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 1999) is reported to value postmodernism's insights while warning that the fashionable infatuation with "discourse" about "difference" is dangerously detachable from the struggle we must all wage against racism, sexism, and cultural imperialism. Harris offers an interesting topic in critical theory discourse which may have dissipated over the years.

In chapter three, Asante outlines a bibliography on the concept of Afrocentricity, listing, annotating and discussing ‘... defining and central works that constitute the minimum basis for a discourse on Afrocentric engagement’ (p. 32) via eleven sections: general approach, theoretical sources, discipline and orientations, Afrocentricity and classical African base, Afrocentricity and critical theory, Afrocentricity and culture, Afrocentricity and historical interpretation, Afrocentricity and radical educational transformation, critics of Afrocentricity, continental African intellectuals on Afrocentricity, and reference works. Those doing research on Afrocentricity should benefit from this extensive annotated bibliography (complimenting “African Centered Text (1990-2000): A Decade of Protracted Engagement” which appeared in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.10, September 2010, pp. 41-61) with sectional introductions from the chief intellect on Afrocentricity which is rarely assembled by a leading scholar in the discipline of Africology.

Contributor Aaron X. Smith provides an assessment of three books (*Blues for Mr. Charlie*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*) of novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic James Baldwin to state that he (Baldwin) became “universally acclaimed critical voice who spoke truth to power” (p.63); dove below the surface assumptions of racial rhetoric to expose the realities of the veneer of racial hatred (p.65), and was able to examine injustice without overdosing on it and manage the fine art of controlled rage (p.74) [The previous section is very confusing]. In this entry, the reader may wonder how Baldwin’s story about a small Southern town where a white man kills a Black man, then throws his body in the weeds (*Blues for Mr. Charlie*), a collection of essays (*Nobody Knows My Name*), and a story about a Black actor who has a heart attack while on stage (*Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*) fit the Afrocentric theme of the anthology. This feat is a bit puzzling. However, the author reasons that Baldwin in an Afrocentric sense is an example of agency in a world that expects less of a Black person.

Next, Asante offers seven minimum bases for the unity civil society in Africa, calling for an active promotion and defense of African culture, an African centeredness and agency, innovative research sources; a United States of Africa that welcomes diversity, and the viewing of the inclusion of all the achievements and contributions of African people as a gift to humanity. The tone is direct and motivational that engages the process of Pan African unity and an African collective consciousness/nationalism in Africa. More than an academic exercise, this chapter tells the reader in a bold fashion that the promotion of African culture must be an objective every day (p.79). Nilgun Anadolu-Okur in chapter six argues that the Afrocentric approach is an alternative to the Eurocentric search for historiographic dominance; there is no need for African centered theories and other non-Eurocentric theories on history and knowledge should not be recognized as prominent elements of historiography and discourse that may provide an array of human possibilities not linked to doctrines of superiority. And finally, Anadolu-Okur states that “Afrocentricity has an important role to play in deciphering the core problems as well as creating new patterns of thinking about intercultural relations” (p.90).

Michael T. Tillotson in chapter seven works to review the nature of the political motivation driving a move to neutralize and suppress the “emancipatory initiatives of African centered scholars” coming from questioning its right to exist as a scholarly enterprise, its adversarial relationship to the Western canon, and its placement in the public school curriculum (pp.107, 112); and contrary to Eurocentric and incorrect reviews of Afrocentricity, it “seeks to maintain diversity of thought and intellectual pluralism for all members of the human family” (p.112). In concluding his article, he rightfully suggest that the attacks against Afrocentricity are not a suitable replacement for credible, detailed research and scholarly driven critical exploration of the ideas of Africentricity, thus those who seek or sought to neutralize and suppress Afrocentricity must come prepared to debate the particulars and multidimensional of Afrocentric thought and action, now in a global environment with its engagement in South Africa, Colombia, France, Brazil, and of course, throughout the U.S. (p. 122).

Continuing in the overall construction of the themes in this work, Molefi Kete Asante offers an existential cartography of Lewis R. Gordon, an Afro-Jewish philosopher, social and political activist, critic, musician and the author of *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Humanity Books, 1995), a detailed existential phenomenological investigation of anti-Black racism as a form of thought pertaining to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and a key player in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology linked to 20th-century French philosophy and Marxism. In this look, Asante states that Gordon’s work has impacted the way he sees existentialism in relationship to African people, and because of Gordon’s familiarity with intellectual discourse on African agency, it is “necessary to analyze the nature of Gordon’s contribution to a form of existentialism that links with the idea of African agency” (p. 126). However, Asante finds it puzzling that Gordon would engage the W.E.B. Dubois notion of double consciousness and in contrast, say that Gordon has devised “a brilliant framework to consider the construction of a two-tiered society to explain server racism in Western societies (p. 129). One may be hard pressed to consider Gordon in the Afrocentric circle, but Asante does, and say he is a “antiquely gifted intellectual” and that he has “surpassed most of other contemporary philosophers in his appreciation of African philosophical traditions (pp.134, 132).

Clyde E. Ledbetter Jr. provides a short history human rights discourse in the African world experience and its link to Africology by exploring theoretical and methodological approaches in chapter nine. Of special note is participation in increasing awareness about the existence of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (also known as the Banjul Charter), an international human rights instrument that is intended to promote and protect human rights and basic freedoms in Africa established in 1987 based in Banjul, Gambia; and second, the Charter of Kurukan Fuga (also called the Manden Charter) of the Mali empire created after the Battle of Krina in 1235 by regional nobles, which represents one of the oldest constitutions in the world (mainly in oral form) containing a preamble of seven chapters advocating social peace in diversity, the inviolability of the human being, education, the integrity of the motherland, food security, the abolition of slavery by raid, and freedom of expression and trade.

In the next section, Molefi Kete Asante, based on *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (Monthly Review Press, 1964) by Kwame Nkrumah, provides an Africentric examination of Kwame Nkrumah's personal philosophy (consciencism). In short, the book (*Consciencism*) examines elements (the Euro-Christian, the Islamic, and the original African) to construct the African conscience as he characterizes traditional African society as essentially egalitarian, and argues that a new African philosophy must draw its nourishment chiefly from African roots. Juxtaposing the above, he reviews Western philosophy in detail to illustrate the thesis that philosophy, however academic, is always trying, explicitly or implicitly, to say something about society. Hence, it is this relevance of philosophy to society, and to social and political action in particular, that chiefly interests him. To begin, Asante located himself and Nkrumah in time, to set the content of Nkrumah's journey to consciencism.

Salvador, Brazil is the site of the following chapter via a 2012 lecture by Asante wherein he argues that the African Union 'has been dangling in the air an idea of a sixth region of Africa dedicated to the Diaspora but it has deliberately created confusion by not being transparent' (p. 177) and in short, they 'misunderstood the nature of the African Diaspora and chose to concentrate on a short period Diaspora called non-resident Africans because of the money that can be remitted to the home countries' (ibid). Continuing his critique of the African Union, he also states that the body has been paralyzed in reference to conflict in and around Sudan, and its region. And in a general context, he writes that Africa must: overcome its lax approach to the interrelationships between people of the African world; establish a philosophy that asserts the African ethos in the world; know what it brings to the table of humanity; and Africa must stop asking others for its agency, because it is something Africa must claim and act upon (p. 181). This chapter is about a call for unity and a new awakening of African world consciousness organized in an African centered passion for growth, development and excellence in all areas of life as the author places his personal ethos in view, saying that his 'aim has always been to go farther in setting a path toward an African resurgence based on the theoretical and philosophical ideas of our African ancestors' (ibid).

Pressing further, in chapter twelve Asante calls for a reorienting in thinking to see the agency of Africa, and the need to remove Greece from the starting place for world history as he outlines the African contribution to civilization in philosophy, geometry, astronomy, mathematics, etc. which all originated in Africa. And in this call, he rightfully writes that it is time for us to 'open our eyes and take another look at our history to be able to chart a new future' which includes a united Africa (p. 196).

"The Universal Periodic Review and the Efficacy of Malcolm X's Human Rights Strategy" forms the concluding chapter. In essence, co-editor (Ledbetter) looks at how Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) had an ability to produce a desired or intended result to human rights when he believed that the U.N. Human Rights Commission (now the Human Rights Council) was the correct venue to bring the plight of African people in the U.S. to the attention of the world community.

Hence, he discusses the mechanism of the Universal Periodic Review, a process which involves a review of the human rights records of all members of the UN, and provides the opportunity for each member to declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to fulfil their human rights obligations. The discussion is detailed, however it doesn't connect with Malcolm X in a substantial way as one would expect by reading the title of this concluding chapter.

Overall, this book is a quality contribution to discussion on the theoretical and applied operations of Africology and Africana Studies. Although Africana Studies was not completely defined, as Africology was, which stand out throughout the text, each contributor places a focus on the Afrocentric paradigm, represented in the academic and social endeavors of Africology.