

Motivational Melancholia: Nathalie Etoke's Rethinking of Subjective Agential Praxis

SAMANTHA KOSTMAYER

Global Center for Advanced Studies (samanthasulaiman@gmail.com)

Nathalie Etoke. *Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition*, trans. Bill Hamlett, foreword by Lewis Gordon. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, USD 26.95. ISBN 978-1-78661-301-1.

This review seeks to evaluate and navigate the theoretical terrain in which author Nathalie Etoke engages new modes of reflection on old problems of anti-black violence and erasure. Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition is a fairly short and accessible text devoted to rethinking paradigms of subjectivity in ways that animate our individual and collective responsibility. She offers theoretical but practical interventions invigorated by the indisputable vitality of Black arts, particularly music and literature. She deftly combines rigorous philosophical examinations of the self and the other with a praxis-oriented invitation to reconsider the pathological hierarchy of social relations since the trans-Atlantic slave trade and how we might best upend them. Etoke's refreshing take is one of possibility and potential.

Key words: Africana philosophy; Black studies; subjectivity; Africa; diaspora; Pan-African; literature; music; political theory; philosophy

Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition by Nathalie Etoke (powerfully translated from the original French by Bill Hamlett, who offers an informative Translator's Note before the introduction) is a poetic transdisciplinary meditation on the material and psychic impact of the resounding rupture born during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, cemented during centuries of African enslavement, and perpetuated through colonial expansion and its relentless grip. Nathalie Etoke, a Cameroonian scholar, theorist, and filmmaker, offers a cogent and compelling set of reflections on the stubborn legacy of anti-black racism and its gross perversion of all the social relations that are both informed and infected by the Middle Passage, the centuries of triangular trade in which millions of Africans were forcibly transported, via theft, to the New World during the Atlantic slave trade, and its aftermath. *Melancholia Africana* offers a philosophical exploration of the pernicious effects of anti-blackness and its continuously insidious violence across time and space. The work, however, is much more than a descriptive philosophy of abjection or a scholarly lamentation on gross historical injustice; rather, the text is an aesthetic deep dive into the cavernous crevices where music and literature are as potent signifiers of brutality and possibility, sorrow and transformation as any philosophical discourse. Etoke weaves a tapestry robustly informed by various disciplines in the service of persuasive theoretical interventions designed both to animate and to fundamentally disrupt the pathogen of anti-blackness and its global reach.

The text is structured by a series of relatively short and distinct chapters, each devoted to a different, but complementary, set of questions and analyses, and each conceptually grounded by an expansive array of artists and thinkers. There are several guiding themes that anchor the text, but

one subtle and deeply enriching arc is liminality: a phenomenological entity never named but ever present in Etoke's thesis. Etoke lays out a clear explanation of the imposed fragility on the very subjectivity of the African man, woman, and child, both on the continent and in the diaspora. Their actual subjectivity, of course, is never in doubt in any rational discourse; the scope of the text, however, requires an acknowledgement of the irrationality, the great lie of Euromodernity and of western thought over the past five hundred plus years whereby *some* people were not fully people but rather reified and often fungible instruments of capitalist accumulation. The hideous conversion in the hull of the slave ship from a substantiated African subject to a commodified black object is one that haunts even contemporary Blackness, and thus Black people, and profoundly vexes Etoke, whose work aims ultimately, and through the rigorous and practical application of theoretical interventions, to redress this terrible trauma and forge ahead with new forms of social relations. And while the text does not explicitly grapple with liminality, what is so movingly alluded to throughout the book are the very tensions in those spaces between life and death, subject and object, memory and forgetting, innocence and culpability, belonging and exile, body and soul. *Melancholia Africana* proffers reparative strategies that could help heal the most aching paradoxes, all while honoring the dialectical process of healing as generative and continuous.

Melancholia Africana invites us to consider the very framework of alterity and social hierarchy forged in the aftermath of the African slave trade; Etoke employs a reworked conception of melancholia to invite a thoughtful meditation on how we constitute our identities amidst the ongoing machinations of always already distorted social relations (9). She bravely revitalizes and nuances Freud's explication of melancholia to include not just the requisite sorrow and psychic dislocation, but also a healthy infusion of transformative opportunity, along with a commitment to honor mourning even while breaking its defeatist stranglehold. *Melancholia Africana*, as a condition or phenomena according to Etoke, "is a poetics of loss, mourning and survival, constructed on the ruins of hope grappling with adversity" (24). Etoke's first person narrative is a humble yet deeply provocative reclaiming of African subjectivity; it is at once self-aware and self-sufficient; it compels us to engage in the ever hopeful project of new intersubjective formations predicated both on reckoning and radical reconstituting of the self and the other. The formidable tools at her disposal are music (predominately African American traditions from the lamenting spirituals and elegiac blues to the improvisational fecundity of jazz), literature (of the continent and the diaspora), and philosophy (from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas). She persuasively and deftly engages this trifecta to powerfully expound upon her set of theoretical paradigms, all while remaining conscious of the spatio-temporal trajectory from the ancestors (the past), through her (the present), and onto the descendants (the future). The critical importance of this through-line is made evident first in Lewis Gordon's compelling introduction to Nathalie Etoke's work. He and she both illuminate the vital role ancestors, not necessarily familial, play in order to affirm the legitimacy of the descendant and to foster further descendants; herein grounds a commitment to the future and those who inhabit it. This important homage is much more than a cultural gesture; it is the thread that connects us all to possibility, to futurity, and allows for the expansion of ideas conceived but not born, or born but not yet instrumentalized, or otherwise dormant and seeking revitalization. This is particularly critical considering the baleful Euromodern bad-faith effort to ossify Africa in some stagnant past devoid of its rich, complex, and diverse history and therefore unable to attain its vital future. As Lewis Gordon aptly puts it, "To erase both history and future through a form of fetishized presentism—if it is not *for me*, it loses value—elides other possibilities of action and life. Where death is part of a continuum, it is not exclusively about what others have done. It is what *we* are to do" (x).

Etoke's polyphonic text is primarily a poetics of pain and possibility, loss and resistance, abjection and renewal. Despite the discrete chapter topics, they are bound together by the buoyant dialogical discourse of a wide array of thinkers and creators. Etoke invites a host of critical theorists and philosophers to animate her assertions, along with the vibrating and reverberating contributions of musicians, poets, and novelists. She has humbly set a table big enough for Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, Cornel West, Judith Butler, Cheikh Anta Diop, Walter Benjamin, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Paget Henry, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Mahmood Mamdani, and several others. The looming literati include George Lamming, Birago Diop, Léonora Miano, Ralph Ellison, and June Jordan. And the sonic seams are woven by Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Louis Armstrong, and Gil Scott-Heron. Etoke manages to pilot her project with great conviction and grace and yet generously include this pantheon of relevant participants to ensure an ever more expansive and engaged passage.

Melancholia Africana is divided into two main sections, which contain 4 and 5 sub-chapters respectively. The first half of the text is entitled "Melancholia Africana: Scattered Fragments of Africa," which is perhaps more descriptive of the phenomena she seeks to address. The second half is entitled "How Does One Make Sense of Postcolonial Nonsense," which is more proscriptive and seeks to redress the still menacing shadow long cast by anti-black violence. Etoke takes her role as both ancestor and descendent seriously and begins her introduction with the foundational ancestors Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Aimé Césaire. This trinity of theorists helped shape twentieth-century conceptions of and yearnings toward emancipatory praxis, and Etoke reclaims that revolutionary drive and generates concrete ideas on how to best ensure not just a compassionate reckoning of black subjugation and subordination, but a fortified and robust Black agency designed to finally disrupt and destroy the ongoing violence of racist alienation and erasure. Etoke is uniquely qualified to shed light on these tensions, having lived and been educated in Cameroon, France, and the US—distinct colonized, colonial, and imperial spaces where anti-blackness is rife and makes its punishing self felt in multifarious ways. The construction of productive paradigms toward redress requires the destruction of noxious and normative assumptions planted centuries ago and still being assiduously harvested today. But as Lewis Gordon asks in his introduction to Etoke's project, "If elimination must occur, why not destroy factories of dehumanization?" (xii). Herein lies the crux of the issue. Etoke converts melancholia from a diagnostic description into a moving motivation designed to both grapple with the past and radically restructure the future. She offers two major interventions to attain the allusive promise of freedom: freedom predicated on horizontal inter-subjectivity, historical honesty, and an end finally to "postcolonial nonsense."

The two main contributions Etoke makes to the ongoing discourse are complementary and yet distinct. Together they breathe life and possibility into the more moribund cracks of the aforementioned liminal spaces that so often plague rather than animate freedom dreams. Her first contribution is the project of "for/giving," not to be confused with "forgiving." This invitation is designed to foster an aspirational and even attainable relationality not contaminated by arbitrary and illegitimate social hierarchies, specifically white supremacy. It's a linguistically elastic gesture toward the power of giving recognition in new and healthier ways. This radical act allows for a reinvention of the subject, a merging of the "I" with the "we"—a motion aligned with transforming victims and perpetrators and the messy Venn diagram the two form. Etoke describes for/giving as the "free act by which everyone gets rid of the inner weight that centuries of dysfunctional relationships created" (xxii). What a generous and generative undertaking, one I would love to see Etoke further illuminate, perhaps with tangible examples and approaches.

The second overarching theoretical contribution of the text is an expansion on her already expansive conception of melancholia, one made actionable by will and intentionality. Etoke crafts a constructive dialectic in the place of surrender, and in that liminal space invites the reinvention of the self, and therefore the other. These segments of the text are vigorously energized by the potency of Black music generally and jazz specifically. Jazz is endlessly iterative and offers lamentations and jubilations, often all in the same song. Its form and power often lie in its collaboratory zeal, musical inter-dependence, and improvisational brilliance. What could be a metaphorical abstraction in less deft hands becomes a motivation, a rallying cry to fully engage in the pronouncement of one's subjectivity, one's humanity, one's right to rights. Here she interjects her fervent assertion that melancholia Africana is diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness is Etoke's striving toward "existential fullness [...]. It integrates pain as catalyst of freedom and not as a factor of victimization" (15). She makes no mention of it specifically but this endeavor to develop an ethos both historically honest and genuinely generous, reckoning and radicalizing, seems to me reminiscent of Ubuntu. Jazz becomes her abiding metaphor here, as she clearly understands and appreciates the creative rigor of the art form and the emancipatory praxis therein. The cohabitation of sorrow and joy, playfulness and severity, are relevant both to the genre and to the goals set forth by diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness allows for the insight that "hope stands on a mountain of corpses" (68), while demanding a fervent engagement with structuring and embracing new modes of being. Etoke does not bother to scold the west for its hubris and millennia of criminality but rather reveals through historical insight the potency of hope and elevated cognizance. Diasporic consciousness dispenses immediately with the universal, with humanism, for both are irredeemably tainted by Euromodern discourses that sought to cement the pernicious "zone of non-being" Etoke seeks to redress. Her theoretical contribution invites a leap past a past defiled and considers anew a past ever more expansive, inclusive, and generative than the shackled memories of enslavement and its aftermath allow. As she astutely reminds us, "the universal confuses alterity with exclusion from the outset" (60).

Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition is primarily a first-person declaration of intent and an invitation to structure and embrace new modes of relationality. It's a work both deeply accessible and demanding. We readers are tasked with thinking dialectically and rigorously about our own actions in hopes we jettison any individual or collective impotency in favor of an ongoing praxis of reconstituting the tangled web of often toxic and violating social relations. Etoke's dual theoretical nexus seeks to fuel the engine of creating intersubjectivities anew. What is at stake is survival itself, and our need, our desperate need, to live in the full recognition of our history, in our radical commitment to a global solidarity and engagement heretofore unknown, not just *in spite of* but *because of* that history.

Samantha Kostmayer is currently working on her PhD in Philosophy/Africana Studies at The Global Center for Advanced Studies, Ireland. She holds a BA and MIA from Columbia University, a Juris-Doctor from the City University of New York, and certificates in Forced Migration Studies (American University of Cairo) and African Studies (Columbia University). In addition, she is a published translator, poet, and short fiction writer.