

Three Recent Texts in Africana Philosophy: Overcoming Disciplinary Decadence

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The following essay is a review of three recent texts in Africana philosophy. These three texts are united by the overarching theme of the teleological suspension of mainstream philosophy. Lewis Gordon takes a global approach to Africana philosophy and his text engages the issue of the historiography of Africana philosophy; George Yancy's approach is situated within the subtradition of African American philosophy and his text pursues a critical Africana study of the existential reality of whiteness; and Neil Roberts situates his work within the subtradition of Afro-Caribbean philosophy, with the declared goal of tackling the concept of freedom.

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The following essay focuses on three recent texts in Africana Philosophy, texts by Lewis Gordon¹, George Yancy², and Neil Roberts.³ Gordon's notion of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity (disciplinary decadence) will function as the foundational analytical device structuring this essay. Consequently, since this notion features so prominently in this essay, the majority of the essay will be devoted to a discussion of Gordon's text.

The main concern of each text is as follows: Gordon takes a global approach to Africana philosophy and his text engages the issue of the historiography of Africana philosophy; Yancy's approach is situated within the subtradition of African American philosophy and his text pursues a critical Africana study of the existential reality of whiteness; and Roberts situates his work within the subtradition of Afro-Caribbean philosophy, with the declared goal of tackling the concept of freedom. As stated above, the meta-theme uniting these diverse concerns, although not explicitly stated in each case, is the importance of critically transcending the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream philosophy. In this regard, these texts strive towards a rethinking of the disciplinary hegemony and dominance of Western philosophy.

1 Gordon on the Teleological Suspension of Disciplinarity and Disciplinary Decadence

Gordon pioneered the notion of disciplinary decadence in his text *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Gordon 2006).⁴ Gordon specifically connects disciplinary decadence with the institutional organization of the various knowledge-producing traditions housed within universities. He defines disciplinary decadence as follows:

Disciplinary decadence is the ontologizing or reification of a discipline. In such an attitude, we treat our discipline as though it was never born and has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die. More than immortal, it is eternal [...]. Such a perspective brings with it a special fallacy. Its assertion

as absolute eventually leads to no room for other disciplinary perspectives, the result of which is the rejection of them for not being one's own. Thus, if one's discipline has foreclosed the question of its scope, all that is left for it is a form of 'applied' work. Such work militates against thinking (*ibid.*: 4-5).

With this background in place, I turn now to focus directly on Gordon's text.

Overview of an Introduction to Africana Philosophy

It should be noted that Gordon explicitly identifies three major themes as dominating the historiography of Africana Philosophy: (1) philosophical anthropology, (2) freedom and liberation, and (3) metacritiques of reason. Broadly construed, philosophical anthropology concerns, among other things, philosophical investigation of human existence, specifically focusing on what it means to be human. This concern is important to Africana philosophy precisely because of the denial of African humanity and the attendant questions of identity emergent from this categorical and ontological condemnation: Who am I? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be African? The second theme of freedom and liberation is also of crucial significance for Africana philosophy precisely because of the historical struggles of Africana peoples to claim and affirm their creative human agency against the forces of dehumanization and oppression. In addition, a major concern of thinkers within the Africana philosophical tradition has been to struggle for the creation of a better world; hence liberation, understood as active social and political transformation, has captured the imagination of Africana thinkers. Finally, the third theme of metacritiques of reason concerns what Gordon identifies as the core of Africana philosophical activities. The notion of a metacritique of reason, within the context of Africana philosophy, is not primarily a rejection of reason but, rather, a radical questioning of the traditional philosophical deployment of reason to undermine the humanity, agency and epistemic credibility of Africana peoples. Accordingly, a metacritique of reason is prominent in Africana philosophy insofar as reason, particularly as reason became itself the victim of a colonizing agenda, was the decisive justificatory instrument of Africana dehumanization and subordination. Africana philosophical metacritiques of reason assault the implications pertaining to (1) what does it mean to be human, (2) freedom, and (3) epistemology. The traditional contention has been that in order to be human one must possess reason. African peoples were considered nonhuman because they were said to lack reason. Consequently, Africana philosophical focus on the question of the human involves a critique of the ontological reduction of the human to reason. Second, the grounding of freedom in the ability to be rational, similarly explains the inclination of Africana philosophers to focus on reason. Freedom is a core concern of Africana philosophy, hence efforts to suppress the freedom of African peoples by denying them the capacity for rationality explains why a metacritique of reason would be prominent within Africana philosophy. Put differently, Africana philosophy focuses on metacritiques of reason precisely because it raises questions about the justification of reason as the basis of humanity and freedom.

Construals of Africana Philosophy

Gordon acknowledges various contextualizations of Africana philosophy, and this bold strategy allows him to portray Africana philosophy as an incomplete or open discursive formation. First, in grounding Africana philosophy in materiality rather than in some transcendental realm, Gordon declares that Africana philosophy is a diasporic philosophy. He does not intend for the notion of "diasporic" to mean the dispersal of a homogeneous African culture but, rather, as indicative of the shared historical and existential tribulations and traumas suffered by African peoples. In embracing this historical and culturally sensitive notion of diaspora,

Gordon states that Africana philosophy is also defined by “the set of philosophical reflections that emerged by and through engagement with the African diaspora” (*ibid.*: 157).

Another dimension of Africana philosophy is its identification as a philosophy of existence. The existential thrust of Africana philosophy emerges from its focus on the concrete existence of the individual. As Gordon put it, “Africana philosophy examines what emerges from the question ‘In reality who and what am I?’ when posed by those who were actually enslaved and by those who lived the dubious status of a questioned humanity” (Gordon 2008: 35). It is the existential urgency of this question that has also involved Africana philosophers with questions dealing with “The centrality of such problem as the meaning of being human, the concept of freedom, and the limits of rationality [...]” (*ibid.*: 133).

Africana Philosophy as Metaphilosophy

It bears noting that Gordon’s conception of Africana philosophy involves him in Africana metaphilosophical reflection. He states that, “Africana metaphilosophy faces the paradox that Africana philosophy is a living philosophy because many of its practitioners are willing to think beyond philosophy [...]. The term I use in my own work [...] is a ‘teleological suspension of philosophy,’ which, paradoxically, generates new philosophy by going beyond philosophy” (*ibid.*: 14). We should note that both Yancy and Roberts share the basic metaphilosophical perspective regarding Africana philosophy, as endorsed by Gordon.

Africana philosophy, emerging in the metacontext of the teleological suspension of philosophy, is a living and evolving philosophy, deeply grounded in the thick existential ether of existence. Hence, Gordon declares that, “In the case of philosophy, its disciplinary suspension—enables the cultivation of new philosophy. [Africana philosophy], from this point of view, is the construction of new philosophy through [Africana philosophers’] willingness to go beyond philosophy, paradoxically, for the sake of philosophy” (*ibid.*: 183).

We are now well positioned to briefly summarize the preceding discussion: Gordon utilizes the idea of teleological suspension to promote a conception of Africana philosophy premised on the notion that conceptions of philosophy are open to revision precisely because they are formulated by existing individuals who are in the process of becoming, individuals constrained by the unpredictability of time and the uncertainty generated by the awareness and limitations of human finitude. Thus, the idea of ‘suspension’ is not a rejection of philosophy but, rather, a reconfiguration of philosophy; it is both a reconstruction of traditional philosophy, as well as a transformation of the practice of academic philosophy along interdisciplinary lines.

2 Africana Philosophy and the Deconstruction of Whiteness

Another recent text in Africana philosophy warranting critical attention is George Yancy’s *Look a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*. The importance of *Look a White!* relates to the counter-gaze of those who were traditionally constructed as objects, namely Blacks, becoming subjects in the act of critically unmasking the transcendental pretensions of whiteness. But, unlike the traditional construction of Blacks as objects of contempt and pity, Yancy’s Africana philosophical reflection on whiteness does not construct whites merely as objects nor condemn whites as incapable of confronting and repudiating antiblack racism.

In his efforts to expose the whiteness of being, Yancy weaves an intricate interdisciplinary exploration of whiteness. We witness here the common theme of confronting the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream philosophy, while embracing a larger interdisciplinary framework.

Yancy invokes the phrase “Look, A White” to establish a black counter-gaze to observe whiteness from the perspective of those Others who have been the targets of the white gaze. The black counter-gaze, according to Yancy, is a matter of “flipping the script.” Flipping the script means that, instead of constructing the white subject as “a sovereign, ahistorical, neutral subject [. . .]” (Yancy 2012: 5), the white subject is now seen “from the perspective of a form of raced positional knowledge” (*ibid.*: 8). Once again, it is important to bear in mind that, unlike the phrase “Look, a Negro!” that dehumanizes blacks by stripping away their subjectivity, Yancy’s, “Look, a White!” does not dehumanize whites but, rather, exposes the extent to which whiteness functions as the transcendental norm of being, as normativity. There are relevant ontological dissimilarities between blackness and whiteness. Thus, the analogy between “Look, a Negro!” and “Look, a White!” though semantically suggestive, is ontologically asymmetrical. The point here is that the phrase, “Look a Negro!” was historically invoked to imprison a Black person within a network of stereotypes from which he/she was not able to escape without risking social retribution. However, the phrase “Look a White!” is invoked not for the purpose of rendering whites the targets of racial retribution but, rather, to conjure up the extent to which whiteness is a historical site of privilege, normativity and epistemic credibility.

Situating and Deconstructing Whiteness

Yancy pursues a critical response to abolitionism in critical race theory. The abolitionist’s strategy takes the form of a critical dismantling of whiteness and, then, denouncing whiteness and the concept of race on the grounds of their dubious ontological status. Certainly, Yancy’s intention is not to offer an ontological defense of whiteness. Instead, Yancy seeks to existentially and concretely expose the lived reality of whiteness. Put differently, for Yancy, it is unhelpful to demand an abolition of whiteness by appealing to the ontological illegitimacy of race.

Yancy distinguishes between the abstract conceptual analysis of race and whiteness, on the one hand, and the lived reality of race and whiteness, on the other hand. Efforts to achieve an objective understanding of the analytical status of race and whiteness do not automatically entail a commitment to understanding the lived reality of race and whiteness. Conceptual clarity, focused on clarifying the scientific referential status of race and whiteness, can be achieved in moments of calm philosophical reflection. However, such an exercise is not a substitute for “[s]truggling to make sense of how race is performed, how it is lived [. . .]. One can easily ‘master’ [a scientific referential analysis of race] with no truly deep and sustained concern for the lived reality of race” (*ibid.*: 26). Put differently, as Yancy points out, there is no necessary connection between the critical analysis of the grammar and logic of white racism directed at blacks and the active commitment to challenge and dismantle racist and oppressive practices.

Existential Reality of White Subjectivity and the Dilemma of Racism

Yancy also gracefully and patiently rebukes naïve positions inspired by a rigid individualism: declarations of antiracism, repudiations of whiteness, and fierce commitments to individual moral responsibility offered in response to the reality of race and racism. These various positions are all manifestations of the liberal conception of the self as ahistorical and autonomous, and as unencumbered by culture, religion, language, and tradition. Since these various strategies of response invoke appeals to a “post racial” paradise, Yancy shows them to be evasions of the structural and existential reality of race, racism, and whiteness. Hence, even as whites declare themselves to be autonomous, atomic individuals, the normativity of whiteness persists. Even when whites seek to establish ontological parity with blacks by portraying both whites and blacks as victims, this effort erects a false equivalence. Consequently, as Yancy points out, whites cannot escape racism simply by declaring that

racism is an individual, private, mental phenomenon and that racist individuals are those individuals who hold certain repugnant beliefs.

Lastly, to assume that a white individual can determine whether or not he or she is racist through “a sincere act of introspection” is equally misleading (*ibid.*: 168). Instead of encountering or achieving a transparent raceless and antiracist self, such efforts to ascertain full self-knowledge fail precisely because “white racism is embedded within one’s embodied perceptual engagement with the social world and [...] it is woven into, etched into, the white psyche, forming an opaque white racist self that influences [...] everyday mundane transactions” (*ibid.*: 169). Epistemic probing of consciousness misleads us with regard to the complexity of racism precisely because the ideal of conceptual mastery requires a distortion of the messiness of mundane encounters, multiple patterns of reactions, intuitions, and somatic responses that reveal more about who we are than we can ever hope to consciously supervise. Yancy’s point is that critically confronting whiteness is a continuous project and not an isolated event inspired by private catharsis.

Those philosophers who reduce philosophy to abstract conceptual analysis will certainly cast suspicion on Yancy’s patient and probing use of an existential approach to the indictment of whiteness. Indeed, as Yancy himself states, some philosophers will not even consider his work to qualify as *bona fide* philosophy.

I find great merit and philosophical worth in Yancy’s Africana existential approach. This Africana perspective is critical of the idea that philosophically legitimate questions and issues should all be addressed with the same analytical tools used to address the referential status of natural kind concepts. These reservations are grounded in the suspicion that formal methods of analysis that are detached from the socio-cultural world may very well be inadequate to address socio-cultural concepts, such as race and whiteness, that are products of continuously reconstituted, ambiguous, and indeterminate contexts. The problem is not that abstract analysis is an improper approach to philosophy. Rather, abstract analysis is not adequate for all types of concepts. On this score, Yancy’s courage in pursuing an alternative route for the interpretation of socio-cultural concepts is not an evasion of proper philosophical methodology but, instead, it is an indictment of the limitations of formal analysis disconnected from the messy reality of concrete human existence. Rather than question the semantic and ontological status of socio-cultural concepts, philosophers would be better served by boldly rethinking the traditional assumption that all concepts must have sharp and determinate boundaries. Methodologically speaking, Yancy’s study of whiteness is an example of an Africana approach to conceptual analysis as grounded in forms of life and not as abstract exercises. Evident here is, once again, the theme of transcending the rigidity of abstract analysis so highly praised by the mainstream philosophy.

3 Africana Philosophy and the Problem of Freedom

The third and final text warranting discussing in Africana philosophy is Neil Roberts’ *Freedom as Marronage*. Roberts’ text nicely complements Gordon’s text, for in addition to the theme of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity, especially with regard to philosophy, Roberts’s main focus is on freedom.

Roberts announces that his conception of freedom as marronage is an alternative to dominant Western narratives of freedom. Consequently, Roberts offers freedom as marronage as a contrast to traditional theories of negative and positive freedom.

Roberts, operating from within an Africana philosophical context, seeks to understand heterogeneous deployments of freedom as, among other things, historically and culturally specific expressions of agency. More specifically, Roberts seeks to amplify the philosophical relevance of the Haitian revolution as the motivational basis for a distinctive Africana conception of freedom. Roberts describes his undertaking as a focused

examination of a “specific, highly overlooked form of flight from slavery—*marronage*—that was fundamental to the experience of Haitian slavery, [and that] is integral to understanding the Haitian Revolution, and has widespread application to European, New World, and black diasporic societies. I call the theory derived from such flight *freedom as marronage*” (Roberts 2015: 3-4). Hence, one of Roberts’ declared goals is to render transparent the “important liminal and transitional social space *between* slavery and freedom” (*ibid.*: 4). But even as he renounces analytical efforts to expose the transcendental ground of freedom, Roberts declares that his notion of freedom as *marronage* is not an abdication of normativity, precisely because “*Marronage* is a normative concept forged in a historical milieu, yet it has trans-historical utility” (*ibid.*). Consequently, since Roberts identifies *marronage* as the underlying principle uniting his text, we must first examine what he means by *marronage*.

Roberts on Marronage: Sociogenesis of Freedom

Roberts anchors the concept of *marronage* in the literal practice of slaves escaping slavery or, rather, the literal flight from slavery to “liminal suspension between slaves on a plantation and the colonizers dictating standards of normativity” (*ibid.*: 5). Maroons take flight from slavery to “zones of refuge.” Such “zones of refuge” are taken as spaces outside both the regimentation of state power and the sovereign normativity of the state. While emphasizing flight as the root marker of *marronage*, Roberts identifies the structural elements that sustain the idea of *marronage* as flight and that also render it a viable analytical framework for freedom. Flight is the root maker of *marronage* since, as Roberts indicates, “*Marronage* is a multidimensional, constant act of flight” (*ibid.*: 9-10).

Roberts does not restrict his endorsement of the Haitian trope of *marronage* only to the Caribbean regional discourse, but also considers it an alternative to dominant notions of freedom. Consequently, Roberts offers freedom as *marronage* as an alternative to negative and positive conceptions of freedom. Negative conceptions of freedom construe freedom as the absence of constraints; freedom is noninterference from others. Positive conceptions of freedom construe freedom as self-control, self-directedness, or self-mastery. Roberts claims that these various conceptions of freedom do not adequately acknowledge the relationality of freedom and, consequently, they treat freedom as a self-sufficient or stable condition. Roberts contends that the ontological rigidity of negative and positive conceptions of freedom is evident in the fact that, “Negative formulations [of freedom] articulate stability as security against interference and domination. Positive ideals endorse a vision of freedom that agents can imagine arriving at, and they classify agents either as participators in the active life or as unfree” (*ibid.*: 15). *Marronage*, unlike these popular conceptions of freedom, construes “freedom as a process of flight bridging the negative and positive polarities” (*ibid.*: 13). Similarly, *marronage* is also a dynamic and fluid process that is analytically independent of the stability of categorical polarities. Roberts, again, declares, “*Marronage* is a flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the spheres of positive activity and human freedom. Flight is multidimensional, constant, and never static” (*ibid.*: 15). The upshot of Roberts’ investigation is that popular or canonical theories of freedom are guilty of the following problem: “the lack of attention paid to slavery and slave agency” (*ibid.*: 27).

While Roberts identifies four permutations of *marronage*, I will limit my discussion to sociogenic *marronage*. Roberts grounds this conception of sociogenic *marronage* in Fanon’s notion of “a zone of nonbeing.” Unlike Patterson’s declaration of slavery as a zone of social death, Fanon’s zone of nonbeing, according to Roberts, despite its otherwise repugnant condition, “is a zone of hope and natality” (*ibid.*: 118). As is obvious, the root image structuring Roberts’ framing of sociogenic *marronage* is the notion of sociality, the social constitution of the world. Indeed, this root image connotes the intersubjective emergence of reality

and not the discovery of an objective reality acknowledged through its representation in a passive consciousness.

Sociogenic marronage is freedom construed as the ability to imagine and create new orders of being; it concerns the making and remaking of worlds. As Roberts claims, “Sociogenic marronage allows us [...] to understand how revolutions are *themselves* movements of flight that usher in new orders and refashion society’s foundation” (*ibid.*: 115-116). Sociogenic marronage crystalizes marronage philosophy. Marronage philosophy concerns “attempts at actualization of flight, of the ability of individuals to become free and to exist from [conditions of nonbeing], and [recognize] perpetual acts of attainment and restructuring [as] part and parcel of what it means to be human” (*ibid.*: 116). And, in another context, Roberts declares that, “Marronage philosophy runs counter to the idea of fixed, determinate endings” (*ibid.*: 174). There are four elements constitutive of sociogenic marronage. As described by Roberts, “Sociogenic marronage denotes macropolitical flight whereby agents flee slavery through nonfleeting acts of naming, vèvè architectonics, liberation, reordering of state and society, and constitutionalism” (*ibid.*: 116).

In this context, naming is a core element of sociogenic marronage because of the political significance that stems from the ontological implications of such naming. Here, Roberts considers naming as world transforming since naming, through the medium of language, “affects our perceptions, knowledge, movements, actions, and interactions” (*ibid.*: 121).

Vodou inspires the second element of sociogenic marronage, vèvè architectonics. A vèvè is a ceremonial image depicting a deity. We can also describe a vèvè as “the symbolic architecture of the deities whose guiding principles [...] structure actions of the good and the bad, the free and the unfree” (*ibid.*: 126). Building on this principles, a vèvè architectonics, within the context of sociogenic marronage, concerns a community’s philosophical imaginary of freedom or, rather, its normative image of freedom.

The third element of sociogenic marronage is the state of society. The focus here concerns the material implementation of a community’s image of freedom. This third aspect of sociogenic marronage, then, is the transition from the symbolic to the material, from representation to concrete instantiation. To the extent that freedom as marronage is grounded in flight from slavery, Roberts claims that the various spheres of civil society and the state should reflect collective ideals of freedom. This flight to freedom demands the annulling of asymmetries characteristic of zones of unfreedom.

The fourth and final element of sociogenic marronage is constitutionalism. Constitutionalism is a process of structural abstraction, where the energy and affectivity that inspired acts of flight, and even revolution, are transformed into a metasystem of principles and rules. Constitutionalism is the universalizing of the ideals of flight beyond the ontological limits of contingent agents. Hence, constitutionalism treats individuals as citizens and does not determine their status on the basis of biological ascriptions.

Just as Yancy involved himself with the methodological challenges concerning the critical study of whiteness and race, here we observe Roberts’ own struggle with critically working through the concept of freedom. Both Yancy and Roberts gesture to the importance of embracing an interdisciplinary approach to philosophy, which is another way of echoing Gordon’s articulation of the importance of escaping disciplinary decadence through a teleological suspension of disciplinarity.

4 Conclusion

I have been arguing that the three texts under review are united by the notion of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity. However, it has not been my intention to intimate that Africana philosophers are in total agreement about the various issues and problems discussed within Africana philosophy. Nevertheless,

all three authors are in agreement with the different issues discussed in this essay. As a matter of fact, it should be noted that they would all endorse the call to make philosophy more interdisciplinary or, in more colloquial terms, they would actively support a creolization of philosophy. Any possible difference among them would take the form of both Gordon and Yancy emphasizing the importance of existential and concrete approaches to philosophy, while Roberts would be more inclined to accentuate the importance of political and social movements. Their views are representative of current developments in Africana philosophy to the extent that the issues debated in Africana philosophy accommodate either of two approaches: the existential or the historical/political. It so happens to be the case that Gordon, Yancy and Roberts represent voices within the Africana philosophical enterprise that are committed to advancing an agenda that is not captive to disciplinary purity. This disciplinary purity defines philosophy as characterized primarily as argumentation, meaning, among other things, linguistic analysis, logical analysis and conceptual clarification. For example, with regard to the concept of race, Africana philosophers in the analytic tradition are inclined to view the concept of race as best resolved through logical and conceptual analysis.

Gordon, Yancy and Roberts, however, seek to ground Africana philosophical practice within the thick experience of Africana existence. Connected with this critical engagement with concrete existence, Gordon, Yancy and Roberts allude to the possibility of thinking outside the theoretical confines of liberal political thought, a style of thinking variously committed to abstract individualism, the denigration of history and an embrace of social atomism. The turn to interdisciplinary modes of analysis and thought is an effort to escape the common practice of merely applying alleged universal principles to Africana experience. This development is also an effort to pursue a reconstruction of philosophy, that is, an effort to incorporate hermeneutical methods of analysis in Africana philosophical activities.

Gordon, Yancy and Roberts deserve credit for their detailed and focused, critical working through of various themes in Africana philosophy. There is no denying that they have done much to elevate our understanding of the intellectual productions of those persons who have traditionally been the targets of intellectual invisibility. Nevertheless, from my critical perspective, I think that in addition to emphasizing the importance of transcending disciplinary decadence, these authors should have also focused more on critically interrogating the dominance of liberalism as the lingua franca of our current political discourse. Even as we engage in critical philosophical work dealing with issues of race, racism, whiteness and freedom, it is incumbent that we also think beyond the philosophical imaginary of liberalism. To this end, it is my hope that by building on the work of Gordon, Yancy and Roberts we find that, in the words of the Haitian proverb, “Beyond the mountains there are mountains”, which is also to say beyond Western philosophy there are other philosophies.

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¹ Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² George Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

³ Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁴ Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO.: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).