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Review of “Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought”

Nancy M. Williams

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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Book Review

Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought, by Lewis R. Gordon. Routledge, 2000. 186 pages +bibliography, index. ISBN 0-415-92644-0

Imagine that you send out a call for papers on subject matter *X*. Imagine still, that some of the received responses claim that subject matter *X* does not exist. This is precisely what happened when Lewis Gordon sent out a call for papers on black existential philosophy. Because existentialism normally devotes itself to the plight of the European bourgeois experience, rather than the experience of black misery, some argue that there is no such thing as black existential thought. Traditionally, the question of black identity centers on the teleological question of black liberation, the ontological question of agency, and the question of black identity in the midst of an anti-black world, while existential philosophy addresses problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation. However, according to Gordon, one cannot in critical good faith raise the question of the black experience without raising these accompanying existential questions. Hence, *Existentialia Africana* is a response to those who claim that existential black philosophy does not exist.¹

While suggesting that existentialism may provide a deeper understanding of the experience of being black in an anti-black society, Gordon presents some of the enigmatic questions surrounding black existentialism in the introductory chapter (“African Philosophy of Existence”). For instance, if existentialism concerns itself with the human condition and blacks have been historically defined as not fully human, what can existentialism say about the black experience?

In Chapter Two (“A Problem of Biography in African Thought”), Gordon spells out the paradoxical nature of black authorship. “How could the black, who by definition was not fully human and hence without a point of view, produce a portrait of his or her point of view?”(p. 23) In other words, how can that which is not fully human tell a story of human existence? On the other hand, Gordon illustrates the historical practice of “locking black intellectuals and their productions in the biographical moment.” (p. 26) According to Gordon, to read the works of black theorists as that of biographies void of reasonable associations that could be associated with the plight of all human experience is to lock black writers out of the epistemic cadre. “White intellectuals provide theory; black intellectuals provide [private] experience” (p.29). In conclusion, Gordon asks that we modify our perception and appreciation of black writing; not only must we recognize that blacks have experience but they also have “the ability to interpret that experience” (p.36)

Gordon articulates in Chapter Three (“Frederick Douglass as an Existentialist”) the existential motives that inspired Frederick Douglass to not only denounce his slavery but also to publicly

announce his subjectivity, his freedom, his being. For instance, the double bind of slave consciousness, according to Gordon, compares to Kierkegaard's analysis of anguish. In Kierkegaardian language, anguish arises from the internal struggle against making decisions that are constitutive of responsibility for the self. In anguish we fear decision, we decide to 'not decide' and so the slave retorts: "If I stay then it entails my acceptance; if I attempt to escape then I must suffer the consequences of that act of disobedience" (p. 47).

In the guise of Sartrean philosophy, the institution of slavery denies the slave the existential status of Other/Self because the status of Other/Self requires that one must be human---not property. "The slave is property...no more than a system of relations: a life estate"; a "fee simple absolute estate"; a "fee simple absolute subject to conditions subsequent" (p. 48). There is no point of view in these systems of relations. Indeed, Frantz Fanon identifies this state of being in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) as one entering "a zone of nonbeing." Property does not write, speak or commit disobedient acts. Furthermore, one does not punish property, so disobedience (that is, writing, speaking or attempting to run free) is an act of human recognition, a demand to be, if anything, the Other. In the face of disobedience, the slave emerges as human. Gordon concludes:

Racism, properly understood, is a denial of the humanity of a group of human beings either on the basis of race or color. It makes such beings a form of presence that is an absence, paradoxically, an absence of human presence. That being so, such beings fall below the category of Otherness, for an Other is another human being. The black slave is, thus, a paradoxically seen invisibility in this regard; seeing him as a black slave triggers not seeing him as a human being (p. 61).

Gordon turns to W.E.B. Du Bois's pursuit for a humanistic social science in Chapter Four ("What Does It Mean to Be a Problem?"). He retells the story of young Du Bois's appointment by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1896 to fashion a study of black populations of the Seventh Ward, a ghetto, in the city of Philadelphia. Du Bois was faced with a dilemma. He knew that the survey was a failure from the start because there was an underlying expectation that the study would conclude that the 'problem' of the city was essentially the 'black problem.' Du Bois was afraid that his study would inadvertently reinforce prejudicial expectations and solidify black pathology. So, with these considerations in mind, Du Bois added another layer of investigation to his survey. He not only studied the black populations in Philadelphia, but he also questioned the study of black folk in the United States. "Du Bois, in effect, announced the metatheoretical question of how theory is formulated" (p. 69).

In light of Du Bois's humanistic social science, Gordon poses an interesting distinction between *epistemic openness* and *epistemic closure*. *Epistemic closure* is when being black is all we need to know about that person's life. There is no further inquiry because knowledge of their being black brings knowledge claims to a close. Conversely, *epistemic openness* is the judgment that there is always more that one could learn about the individual who occupies that social role. When one encounters a student, for instance, one does not necessarily judge the role of student to cover the entire scope of that student's life and being. Such is the case for many other social roles and other social groups. "In the case of epistemic closure, however, the identification of the social role is all one needs for a plethora of other judgments" (p. 88). In conclusion, Gordon points out the possible social ramifications of *epistemic closure* on the study of black folk.

Gordon turns to Naomi Zack's work on the phenomenological standpoint of mixed races in Chapter Five ("Mixed Race in Light of Whiteness and Shadow of Blackness"). There are two main issues: (1) why we speak of race when there is no adequate scientific foundation for such distinctions; namely, how value constructions are concealed and passed off as "factual" or "value-free" constructions and (2) when discussing the prejudices of white superiority, Gordon provides an insightful comparison between the political dynamics in mixed-race contexts and Sartre's description of the bourgeoisie.

Chapters Six and Seven analyze the existential implications of African religious thought on African Americans. In particular, Gordon provides two examples, Josiah Young's *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (1992) and Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (1995), that show the relationship between African American's relation to Africa and the impact of such a relation on African American religious thought.

Chapter Eight ("Existential Borders of Anonymity and Superfluous Invisibility") examines the overall social ramifications of his earlier arguments; namely, what are we to do about a social formation built upon the paradoxical nature of black existence? "The modern black is born at the birth of the Americas, and is indigenous to "America" and other New World formulations. The irony is that the very institutions that created the black are also those that detest blacks" (p. 162). Gordon ends the book with a chapter ("Words and Incantations") devoted to personal reflections about his childhood, writing, and his mixed experiences in formal education.

So, what are we to make of Gordon's book? First, Gordon anchors his work primarily in the writings of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. So, I encourage readers who want to explore the existential dimensions of these three prominent black writers to review Gordon's book. Indeed, *Existential Africana* has an extensive bibliography that would be of considerable value for anyone working on African American philosophy. Second the crux of Gordon's argument can be found in Chapters Three and Four. By articulating black experience within existential domains (e.g. slaves striving for the category of Other), Gordon offers us a deeper understanding of the phenomenology of racial oppression. However, I think it would have been helpful if Gordon had elaborated more on how the black experience differs from the experience of other members in oppressed groups. For instance, Gordon argued that *epistemic closure* refers to how one may view black folk. Yet, could we not suggest that *epistemic closure* might also apply to how society views homosexuals? Can the notion of not being fully human apply to other members of oppressed groups? Though Gordon skims over some of these considerations in certain sections of the book², I think devoting an entire chapter to them would have enhanced his analysis.

Nancy M. Williams

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Notes:

1. I think it is important to note Gordon's distinction between Africana philosophy and black philosophy. Black philosophy is the broader term that relates to the question of blackness. Not all black people are of African descent: indigenous Australians, whose lived reality is that of being a black people, are an example.

2. See chapter six where Gordon examines how certain religious practices may have an impact on gender/race identity.

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