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Book Review

A Companion to African-American Philosophy, Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman, eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 488 pp, \$138.95 (hbk), ISBN 1557868395.

Does knowledge always free? To African Americans, knowledge of their own culture and that of other peoples saves their energies from dissipation or misapplication; it exposes bogus claims and excuses; it fixes responsibilities where they belong and dismisses false pleas of impotence as well as false charges against victims; but it cannot widen the scope of their freedom beyond borders predetermined by factors genuinely and permanently outside their control. This knowledge has involved metaphysics, logic, and epistemology. It is approached with all the sophistication of historical inquiry, analytic tools, and close familiarity with African American culture. The institutionalization and legitimatization of African American philosophy came into existence through African American political activism in the 1960s, and this area continues to grow in its size and its influence. *A Companion to African American Philosophy* edited by Tommy Lott and John Pittman is a volume representative of select major areas of current research of this lively area in philosophy.

There are thirty-one articles in this volume, most of which are about fourteen pages in length, written by thirty-two authors. Each article has references attached and the volume has a good index. The articles are divided into six parts with introductions highlighting the arguments of the articles presented in each part. The familiar names of leading philosophers and academics from other disciplines are here. The editors intend this volume to be an initial contribution towards the merging of interests among all philosophers.

The first part addresses philosophical issues that arise in applying European ideas to the experience of African Americans and assesses the primary schools of thought within the African American tradition. Cornel West's 'Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience' is a forthright rejection of three historical traditions of African American thought---vitalist, existentialist, and rationalist. West rejects the vitalist position's romanticization of African American culture and the rationalist position's call for the rejection of African American culture and advocates its assimilation into American society because they overlook and fail to improve cultural life or ameliorate the socioeconomic conditions of most African Americans. Neither is the existentialist position desirable because it supports the personal marginalization to both African American culture and American society which undermines its creativity. However, West finds the humanist tradition desirable because it succeeds where the others fail as well as promotes personal integrity and political action.

The second part has three articles revolving around Lewis Gordon's argument that the history of

African American thought has been influenced by existential circumstances of 'Black' suffering. Ronald Judy's discussion utilizes Immanuel Kant's *Inaugural Dissertation* in application to a plantation owner seeking to understand the language used by his slave. Anita Allen and Thaddeus Pope cite U.S. federal court decisions that employ prominent social contract theories to justify slavery. Bernard Boxill concludes the part by arguing that John Locke's Second Treatise on Civil Government implies African Americans are entitled to reparations in order to remedy damages caused by slavery and discrimination. He counters the assumption that European immigrants innocently benefited from injustice to African Americans by arguing they came to the U.S. to take advantage of their White privilege.

Part three concentrates on the relationship of Africana philosophy to Africa. Lucius Outlaw criticizes Molefi Asante's Africalogy for wrongly attributing the concept of objectivity to Europeans and points out that this is inconsistent with Asante's dependence on objectivity in his claims about fair interpretation. Tommy Lott follows by critically examining Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which maintains there are African retentions found in African American cultural practices. According to Lott, Gilroy's theory of cultural hybridity based on the common history of slavery and the intercultural connect created by the slave trade is not inconsistent with their identity, although interracial cultural influences undermines the appreciation of African retentions. He then proceeds to carefully sift through the negative views of Africa held by Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and Edward Blyden. Finally, he counters Gilroy's rejection of Alain Locke's argument that as a criterion of authenticity African American cultural practices express their experiences by arguing these transformed retentions enable them to adapt to their environment. Albert Mosley provides a good summary of the universalist and hermeneutical arguments rejecting ethnophilosophical interpretations of African philosophy and their shortcomings.

Part four presents a broad range of sophisticated analyses on the transformation of White supremacy. Charles Mills' "White Supremacy" explains that White supremacy is social construction created and spread through European colonialism that has transformed race from a de jure to a de facto form, though Mills leaves out any meaningful discussion of the internalization of White supremacy by African Americans. It ends with Mills arguing that White supremacy should be viewed as systematic, multi-dimensional, and a socially constructed objective reality in order to have a sufficient paradigm to illuminate White privilege and subordination of African Americans. Included as well are, among others, Patricia Collins arguing for recognition of the role intersectionality plays in the oppression of African American women and Joy James' critique of the marginalization of African American feminists resulting from seeing their plurality as monolithic and the antithesis of the robust American body.

Part five continues and expands upon the analyses presented in other parts by highlighting the role of social policy and jurisprudence in American society as well as the need for promoting color conscious policies to address the shortcomings of both. Michele Moody-Adams confronts the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions and insists that it is inconceivable to assume that racial injustice would be alleviated with merely ending legally sanctioned and enforced segregation. She reviews arguments that color-conscious policies are problematic due to factors such as immigration, but she still considers these policies as the only viable solution. For Howard McGrady, however, the Court's reasoning in the *Brown* decision that single race schools violate equal protection is based on the myth that African Americans are

mentally inferior. After all, integration is not vital for the well-being of African Americans, though equal treatment by the government and adequate financial resources are vital. This section also contains an excellent article by Angela Davis going beyond Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* in order to analyze the role of race in histories and theories of punishment and a welcomed article by Annette Dula addresses the need for health care policies that address both universal and group-specific needs to remedy the health problems caused by institutionalized racism in the health care system.

In part five, there is a laudable effort made to present the complicated and proliferating areas of aesthetic and cultural values. These articles reveal that African American culture serves as both a commercial product and a possible means of racial uplift. This is most evident in Leonard Harris's discussion on the Harlem Renaissance that notes the competing view of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke over how various art forms could best serve as propaganda to motivate African Americans to improve their social conditions, though this potential was undermined due to the beliefs of their powerlessness and conservatism resulting from the institutionalization of their art. Richard Shusterman changes the focus to rap music and discovers this controversial music similar to Cynicism and Epicureanism in its promise of a better life through practicing its lifestyle. Bill Lawson emphasizes the political content of rap lyrics by showing how rap artists list economic discrimination and racist police practices as examples of the failure to satisfy the elements of social contract theory provided in John Locke's *Second Treatise*. In doing so, Shusterman and Lawson misconstrue the nature of rap by focusing only on the positive social attributes rather than looking at it as a whole.

This volume is a rich and coherent collection of articles intended for students and specialists alike which opens up a variety of African American philosophical thought that still has much to tell us. The reader will find it surprising and refreshing that this volume does not focus primarily on the philosophy of familiar individuals, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr., but encompasses a wide-range of individuals as well as issues. The articles are well-written, straightforward and reliable accounts of this philosophy that refrains from advancing novel interpretations or revising widely accepted ones. In doing so, it represents a welcome willingness to engage the important advances of our understanding of African American philosophy in a more comprehensive manner than some other volumes, such as Tommy Lott's *African-American Philosophy* and *Subjugation and Bondage*, and builds upon that scholarship in new and challenging ways.

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