TAKING AFRICANA EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SERIOUSLY

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Africana existential philosophy, as a subfield of Africana philosophy, is a relatively recent phenomenon in North American, European, and African academic philosophy. Africana existential philosophy of education is an even more recent phenomenon in the field of educational theory. Given the nascent status of Africana existential philosophy in academia, many educators and philosophers of education might question whether an Africana existential philosophy of education has anything of lasting significance to contribute to educational theory.

This worry is an unwarranted one, for Africana existential philosophy, as a mode of philosophical reflection, is centuries old, with roots in pre-colonial West African religious traditions.[1] And, by extension, Africana existential philosophies of education can also trace their origins back to precolonial West African religious traditions. However, this essay will not be an exercise in tracing the origins of Africana existential philosophies of education back to precolonial West African religious traditions, since scholars such as Paget Henry, Clevis Headley, and Stephen Nathan Haymes have already contributed much to that project.[2]

Even though this essay does not trace the origins of Africana existential philosophies of education back to precolonial West African religious traditions, I think I should mention a couple of the similarities between these precolonial religious traditions and African existential philosophy in general. One similarity between precolonial West African religious traditions and African existential philosophy is that one could interpret many Africana existential philosophies (for example, Lewis Gordon's Africana philosophy of existence, Frantz Fanon's sociogeny, and Howard Thurman's religious thought) as somewhat Europeanized, and often secularized, versions of precolonial West African "spirituo-analysis…of ego-formative problems."[3] In fact, their approach to and critique of antiblack racism and its detrimental effects on the formation of healthy African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American identities is a New World equivalent to earlier West African spirituo-analysis of problematic ego formation. A second similarity between them and at least some recent Africana existential philosophies is the technique used to displace the mundane ego in order to examine in detail the meaningfulness of our lived experience. In both of these traditions, practitioners of this ego displacing technique perform it in order to prepare themselves for an examination of *how* their lived experiences are co-constituted by the relationships, encounters, and engagements she has with other living persons, her ancestors, other living organisms, and her environing world.[4]

This essay addresses the concerns educators and philosophers of education might have about an Africana existential philosophy of education by first defining Africana existential philosophy. Then, it performs an all-too-brief phenomenological investigation of the lived experiences of persons of African descent in the United States. This essay will end by offering a few valuable insights for educators and philosophers of education on how to identify and perhaps transcend the antiblack racism embedded in most of the U.S. educational institutions from kindergarten to graduate school.

Defining Africana Existential Philosophy

Let us begin this section with an explanation of what I mean by "African existential philosophy."[5] I associate Africana existential philosophy very closely with its theoretical cousin, Africana phenomenology. Moreover, since I think that human existence cannot be examined apart from examining how the meaningfulness of that existence is constituted by humans, I often see Africana phenomenology as a sort of Africana existential philosophy. For the purposes of this essay, one can think of Africana existential philosophy as being an Africana-oriented existential phenomenology.

But what is an Africana-oriented existential phenomenology, and how would it be practiced? Africana existential phenomenology is a type of phenomenology in which phenomenologists investigate those phenomena that constitute Africana existence, particularly the lived experience of antiblack racism by Africana persons (persons of African descent) and their liberatory efforts to overcome antiblack racism.[6] In a very real sense, Africana existential phenomenology is always already a creolized philosophical discourse. It cannot help but examine the lived experiences of Africana persons through the lens of certain concepts lifted from Europeanized philosophy and transformed in such a manner that they disclose the "givenness" of Africana lived experiences as just that: the lived experiences of *persons* who happened to have been racialized many centuries ago at the dawn of Western and Central European modernity.

How does the "givenness" of the lived experience of Africana persons disclose itself to an Africana phenomenologist? The transcendental reduction that is performed by an Africana phenomenologist is one that is compatible with, if somewhat different from, Husserlian phenomenology. This means that rather than suspending all existential judgments about the world to clear a space for investigating how we constitute the meaningfulness of the phenomena we experience, practitioners of Africana phenomenology envision the phenomenological reduction as a means of bracketing the "reality" of racial categories. Once the mundane "existence" of these racial categories is put in abeyance, one can then investigate how these racial categories are constituted by examining the lived experiences of Africana persons. Questioning the "reality" of racial categories does not mean that they are unreal, however. What it does mean is that they are not universal features of the human condition;

instead, they are significant sociocultural concepts that have partially determined what it means to be human for several centuries in many Western and Westernized societies. This insight into the thoroughly historical nature of racial categories allows Africana existential phenomenologists to "see" the world as a racialized one. And having the racial dimensions of our social world disclose themselves allows Africana existential phenomenologists to appreciate how differences between Africana persons—differences in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, levels of formal education, religious affiliation, personal interests, and so on—are eliminated for the convenience of Europeans and those of European decent.

Africana existential phenomenology also presupposes the possibility of us performing ego displacement techniques. One can think of "ego displacement"[7] as what occurs once one suspends one's existential judgments about the world. In the case of racial identities, by distancing ourselves from the presuppositions of an antiblack world, we have a chance to examine how such a world is co-constituted by us. We are able to examine how we uncritically "take up" the already existing racial landscape for ourselves and for others. It places us in a position where we can acknowledge our complicity in perpetuating a world that dehumanizes people due to their racial identities. (This is not limited to racial identity, however. It can include socioeconomic status, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, or any other sociocultural marker that societies can attach to someone. For the purposes of this essay, we will restrict our discussion to racial identity, more specifically black racial identity.)

PHENOMENOLOGICALLY VIEWING BEING "BLACK" IN AN ANTIBLACK WORLD

Until now this essay has been too abstract. To make it slightly more concrete, I would like to offer a brief African existential phenomenological analysis of some of the pre-critical presuppositions of what it means to be racially "black"[8] in the United States. Given the lived experience of many persons of African decent in the United States, to be black in an antiblack world[9] means that one is burdened with justifying one's personhood to racist Euro-American (white) persons, and to justify one's personhood is to be present to oneself "as a given existent,"[10] that is, an object. Gordon has described how black persons often have to justify their very existence to Euro-American persons this way:

> The racist…in making the demand [for black persons to justify their existence], positions himself as self-justified while asking another human being to justify his right to exist. Symmetry is already broken down in a situation that demands symmetry. The racist thus elevates himself…above the human to the level of God and the Other below humanity. In effect, he says to the Other, "The

problem with you is that you are not *I*. Show me that you have a quality that has an equivalence relation with me."[11]

The black Other is not a Levinasian Other (*l'autrui*) whom antiblack Euro-American racists recognize as a fellow person. For the white antiblack racist, the black Other is less than a person, while the anitblack Euro-American racist occupies the peculiar position of regarding himself or herself as a self-sufficient and self-justifying being, precisely the characteristics traditionally possessed by the divine in the neo-Platonic and Aristotelian tradition and in many forms of Western monotheism. Nevertheless, antiblack Euro-American racists know that they are neither self-sufficient nor self-justifying beings. Yet, they are comfortable in asking entire groups of persons to do something they themselves cannot do.

Fanon articulates this phenomenon concisely in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Because it is a systematic negation of the other, an unreasonable decision to refuse to the other all the attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly, 'In reality, who am I?'"[12] Fanon's description of colonialism in general is equally applicable to antiblack racism, because antiblack racism demands that black persons ask themselves the same question.[13] Moreover, in an antiblack society, black persons often find themselves asking questions related to Fanon's question, questions such as, "Did my employer hire me because I'm qualified or because my employer sought to satisfy EEOC requirements?" and "Did I get into graduate school because I'm qualified or because of their efforts to recruit minority students to their university?" These questions haunt many black persons, because antiblack racism has a way of lessening the dignity of black persons, even those persons who have stellar qualifications and experience, by having them second-guess their qualifications and expertise while white mediocrity is excused and tolerated.

Unfortunately, black persons in an antiblack world are not only required to justify their existence, but also to justify their existence given that they are supposedly a "problem people." William Bennett's infamous thought experiment in 2005 is a paradigmatic example of portraying African Americans as a problem people. In his thought experiment, Bennett proposed, for the sake of argument, that "if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down." To his credit, he immediately said that doing so would be "impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible." Hence, we can agree with columnist Eugene Robison that Bennett did not intentionally advocate the genocidal extermination of African American children in the womb.[14]

But what led Bennett to propose such a thought experiment in the first place? Bennett explained that he was responding to Steven Levitt's *Freakonomics* where Levitt "argues that the steep drop in crime in the United States over the past 15 years resulted in part from the *Roe v. Wade* decision

legalizing abortion." Robinson summarizes Levitt's position on this issue in these words: "Levitt's thesis is essentially that unwanted children who grow up poor in single-parent households are more likely than other children to become criminals, and that *Roe v. Wade* resulted in fewer of these children being born. What he doesn't do in the book is single out black children."[15]

This does not explain why Bennett associated *criminality* with *African Americans*, however. Examining Bennett's gaffe through the theoretical lens of Africana existential philosophy does. Indeed, Africana existential philosophy allows us to explain why Bennett associated criminality with African Americans in his argument against Levitt's position this way: Bennett has uncritically accepted the racist stereotype that African Americans are inherently criminals to such an extent that he did not realize that one of the central premises in his argument presupposed the criminality of African Americans.

Yet, the perception of black as a "problem people" extends beyond unintentional antiblack Euro-American racists. This perception is held by many black persons toward blacks of lesser socioeconomic status. Indeed, there are many black people who interpret the behavior of other black persons through the lens of preconceived racist stereotypes, such as that black men are criminals and black women are sexually promiscuous and welfare queens.[16] The view that black persons are a problem people even affects much of the U.S. national media coverage of African Americans. One of the more recent, high-profile examples of this phenomenon is the coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in New Orleans. During the aftermath of Katrina, when many of those left behind went into abandoned grocery stories in search of food, many photographs were taken of them. There were two photographs taken that, if juxtaposed, show how African Americans are depicted as problem people. The first photograph, "circulated by the Associated Press, showed an African American man, wading through the flood, toting a bag and a case of cola. 'A young man,' read the caption, 'walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store.'"[17] The second photograph, "taken for Getty Images, showed a white couple, also wading through water, and toting a bag and backpacks. 'Two residents,' the caption read, 'wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.'"[18] The caption for the African American photograph makes sense given the common assumption in American society that African Americans, especially young African American men, are criminals. This, in turn, reinforces the view of African Americans as a problem people. This is especially true when we compare the African American photograph to the Euro-American couple. Unlike the young African American man, the couple was not seen through the prism of criminality. Instead, their act of theft was deemed acceptable due to emergency circumstances. Indeed, their act was not seen as being criminal at all.

Antiblack racism does even more than convert black persons who have problems into problem people, however; it embeds racist stereotypes and

oppressive practices into the social fabric of Western societies, making it difficult and even extraordinary for a black person to live a mundane life. That is to say, antiblack racism "make[s] its noxious values so familiar and frequent that they cease to function as objects of observation and reflection; they, in short, become unreflective and so steeped in familiarity that they become invisible." Gordon compares the ubiquitous nature of antiblack racism in Western societies to fish in water. As fish take being wet for granted, since their environing world is a liquid one, antiblack racists take antiblack racism for granted, since it permeates every corner of their social environment.[19]

Unlike in a non-racist society where "black presence would be no more unusual than any other presence in the world,"[20] and where black persons could be anonymous in social settings, the very presence of black persons arouse suspicions in an antiblack society. This is not to say that all responses of this kind are unwarranted. There are cases in which it would be prudent for someone to avoid specific groups of African Americans men, such as when they are wielding weapons and hurling obscenities at that person. Yet, many, if not most, of the avoidances of young African American males are unwarranted. Many persons just presume that young African American males are criminals, and therefore they must be avoided. Young African American males are not the only ones who are considered criminals to be avoided, however. Even professional African American women who are obviously well-dressed can be suspected of being criminals as they visit a friend living in a luxury condominium in downtown Philadelphia.[21] It seems that the mere presence of a black person is sufficient for a Euro-American person or non-African American person to justify avoiding him or her.

Insights Africana Existential Philosophy Offers Educators And Philosophers Of Education

I think that we have investigated the lived experience of most, if not all, African Americans in sufficient detail for us to be in a position to recognize the insights that Africana existential philosophy offers educators and philosophers of education. So, what does an Africana existential philosophy of education have to teach educators in the United States? Here are the four insights from Africana existential philosophy that are applicable to educators, regardless of the educational institution for which they teach:

> 1. We adults are partially responsible for co-constituting our present social reality; we should own up to that fact when instructing students.

> 2. As co-constituters of our present social order, we adults are responsible for not only its beneficial elements, but also for its detrimental elements. This includes antiblack racism.

3. Educators should be aware of how antiblack racism can insidiously affect the classroom environment for students, especially African American students.

4. To prevent the dehumanization of those students who are marginalized due to their racial identities, we should avoid perpetuating a false universalism in which the Euro-American ideals of aesthetic beauty, rationality, and so on are considered superior to all other cultures *a priori*; that is, it shuns Eurocentrism for a fallibilistic humanism that regards African Americans as significant in their own right.

These insights, in turn, point to a more general contention concerning education, namely that formal education (that is, education that occurs in primary, secondary, and nonvocational postsecondary educational institutions) should contribute to the intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual growth of all students who yearn to learn, and not just those students who identify with or benefit from the status quo. Africana existential philosophy can also contribute to the larger goal of educating their students just how they act to co-constitute the meaningfulness of the world in which they live.

Of course, for younger students educators would first have to teach them about how the world in which they live has already been constituted by previous generations before the students can become sensitive to and recognize how the world has acquired the meanings that it currently has for people today. That way, when those same students become adults, they can be in a better position to appreciate the implications of being partially responsible for the constitution of their present social reality. Of course, there is always a danger that educators who adopt this approach could unwittingly transmit antiblack biases and prejudices to their young students, given that a significant number of the ways in which previous generations of Americans have constituted their social reality has been done in an antiblack spirit.[22] Nonetheless, educators could adopt what Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon call "the pedagogical imperative"[23] as a means of lessening the danger involved in teaching students, especially students in the K–12 educational system, how their social reality has been constituted by their ancestors. This pedagogical imperative refers to educators' moral obligation to provide their students with the most "truthful portrait of reality available" to them.[24] Abiding by this imperative would require educators to acknowledge their own fallibility to their students and recognize how their own biases, prejudices, and presuppositions often influence what they select to teach their students and how they teach that selected content to their students. This imperative would also require educators to be willing to alter their beliefs whenever there is sufficient evidence to do so. With respect to the issue at hand, the pedagogical imperative would require U.S. educators, for example, to admit to their students that until relatively recently "the US educational system, from the then-budding preschools and more formal

kindergarten through to the doctorate of philosophy, was infused with racial logics whose absence was rare."[25] Moreover, it would require educators to teach all students, regardless of their racial identities, that many persons of African descent have beneficially contributed to the arts, the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and mathematics; in other words, educators would be obligated to teach their students that persons of African descent have beneficially contributed to the human community over several millennia.[26]

One can view Africana existential philosophy of education, then, as an educational philosophy that is founded upon the presupposition that education be understood as a lifelong effort to be vigilant against those sociocultural and political forces and factors that aim to deny anyone, particularly African Americans, of their agency, that is, their capacity to act in the world as persons whose actions are historically significant. An Africana existential philosophy of education would remind us to be vigilant against the ever-present threat of dehumanization many students face daily simply due to their racial identities, especially for African American students. Moreover, it would demand that educators learn how to identify and transcend the presuppositions and social practices of an antiblack society intelligently and then teach their students to do likewise.

NOTES

1. See Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. chap. 1; and Clevis Headley, "Egological Investigations: A Comparative Study of African Existentialism and Western Existentialism," *C.L.R. James Journal* 10, no. 1 (2004): 73–105.

2. Ibid. Haymes has done valuable research on slave pedagogy in the United States and its relation to Africana existential philosophy with regards to education in Stephen Nathan Haymes, "'Us Ain't Hogs, Us Is Human Flesh': Slave Pedagogy and the Problem of Ontology in African American Slave Culture," *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), esp. 140–3.

3. Henry, *Caliban's Reason*, 33; also see 44.

4. Ibid., 42–4. The purpose of practicing an ego displacing technique will be explain in further detail in the next section.

5. A significant portion of the following two sections is comprised of revised passages from the fourth chapter of Dwayne A. Tunstall, *Being Persons in a Depersonalizing World: Marcel and Gordon on the Human Condition in Late Western Modernity* (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 2007).

6. Paget Henry, "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications," *C.L.R. James Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 82.

7. My usage of the term "ego displacement" differs from Henry's, even though it presupposes this precolonial Western African religious performances of ego displacement as a means of accessing the supersensible world by displacing the everyday ego's attachment to the natural attitude, that is, viewing the world in terms of how one normally perceives it (Henry, *Caliban's Reason*, 60−1).

8. While any definition of being racially black in the U.S. context can be considered a controversial one, for the purposes of this essay, "black" will refer to "both (1) those persons who have certain easily identifiable, inherited physical traits (such as dark skin, tightly curled or 'kinky' hair, a broad flat nose, and thick lips) and who are descendants of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa and (2) those persons who, while not meeting or only ambiguously satisfying the somatic criteria [stated in (1)] are descendents of Africans who are widely presumed to have had these physical characteristics." Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.

9. Here I use the terms "antiblack world" and "antiblack society" interchangeably to describe how U.S. society is, for the most part, normatively antiblack in nature. Neither of these terms is meant to foreclose the possibility of there being certain ongoing interpersonal relationships and organizations that are not antiblack. Yet, with the contemporary emphasis in mainstream Anglo-American political theory, political philosophy, and educational theory on color-blind procedural approaches to redress the detrimental consequences of previous racial discrimination and oppression on black persons, I think that using these terms will remind the reader that black persons are still affected by the detrimental psychological, economic, political, and social features of de facto institutional racism (for example, racialized urban poverty).

10. Lewis R. Gordon, "Racism as a Form of Bad Faith," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 92, no. 2 (1993): 6−8, http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/newsletters/v99n2/blackexperience/1993-gordon.asp.

11. Ibid.

12. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 182; quoted in Lewis R. Gordon, "Fanon and Development: A Philosophical Look." *Africa Development* 29, no. 1 (2004): 91n15; this is Gordon's translation of the quoted sentence.

13. Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 42.

14. Quoted in Eugene Robinson, "A Specious 'Experiment,'" *Washington Post*, October 4, 2005, A23, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/03/AR2005100300952.html.

15. Ibid.

16. While this section does not examine specifically the ways in which black women are objectified by white men, white women, and even black men in an antiblack world, Gordon has written on this topic. For Gordon's examination of how sexism and racism are conjoined in an antiblack world, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), chap. 4. For an informative discussion of how antiblack racism converts black women into exotic, hypersexual beings that is compatible with Gordon's position on this topic, see Janine Jones, "Tongue Smell Color black," in *White on White/Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). For an instructive discussion of how black women are portrayed in a misogynistic manner in American society, esp. in American popular culture, see Andrea Queeley, "Hip-Hop and the Aesthetics of Criminalization," in *The New Black Renaissance: The Souls Anthology of Critical African-American Studies*, ed. Manning Marable (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), esp. 192–5.

17. Quoted in Timothy Chambers, "'They're Finding Food, but We're Looting?': A Two-Ethics Model for Racist Double Standards," in *American Philosophy Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 6, no. 1 (2006): 7n2.

18. Ibid.

19. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 38.

20. Ibid., 39 and 43.

21. Taunya Lovell Banks, "Two Life Stories: Reflections of One Black Woman Law Professor," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, et al. (New York: New Press, 1995), 331.

22. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

23. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, "Introduction: On Working Through a Most Difficult Terrain," in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, eds. Gordon and Gordon (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), xxii.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. This does not mean that educators should romanticize black culture or portray it only in glowing, heroic terms when teaching students. That would simply invert the racial logics operating in the U.S. educational system, placing black persons in the exalted position that Euro-American whites have traditionally occupied.