An Introduction to Africana Philosophy

In this book Lewis R. Gordon offers the first comprehensive treatment of Africana philosophy, beginning with the emergence of an Africana (i.e. African diasporic) consciousness in the Afro-Arabic world of the Middle Ages. He argues that much of modern Africana thought emerged out of early conflicts between Islam and Christianity that culminated in the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, and out of the subsequent expansion of racism, enslavement, and colonialism which in their turn stimulated reflections on reason, liberation, and the meaning of being human. His book takes the reader on a journey from Africa through Europe, North and South America, the Caribbean, and back to Africa, as he explores the challenges posed to our understanding of knowledge and freedom today, and the response to them which can be found within Africana philosophy.

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In Memory of Yvonne Patricia Solomon
(1943–2004)
and
Lewis Calwood Gordon
(1943–2004)

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Preface

This book came about through an odd series of circumstances. I was asked to write up a proposal for it while tending to the last rites for the man whose first and last name I share. Those were harrowing times. It was at the end of a year in which, through losing both my parents, I became an orphan. Proposing a text that invokes ancestors as witnesses was something I thought I would not have been able to bear. I found strength and inspiration articulating their contributions and representing this field for Cambridge University Press.

Africana philosophy has experienced growth among professional philosophers in the past two decades. Although this book explores a constellation of thought over the course of a millennium, pioneering work in the academy belongs to William R. Jones, Leonard Harris, and Lucius T. Outlaw for offering a way of writing about this field that has had enormous impact on its participants. The difference between them and their predecessors was that they brought the metaphilosophical question of African diasporic philosophy – its conditions of possibility – to the forefront of professional philosophical debates in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a privilege to enter the academy in the 1990s on the shoulders of their pioneering work. An even greater privilege is this opportunity to advance my position on the problematics they have outlined. My own work argues for the expansion of philosophical categories. Thus, when the question of introducing the field of Africana philosophy became concrete in my agreement to write this book, it became clear to me that the text itself required philosophical inquiry. How, in other words, does one introduce an area of philosophy whose basis has been a challenge to philosophy and related fields such as political theory and intellectual history?

The task at hand transcended the history of philosophy by demanding an interrogation of the distinction between historical work in philosophy and

philosophical work in the history of ideas. This is not my first encounter with such issues. I raised such questions in 1995 in the introduction to my book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, when I argued against the tendency to reduce black thinkers to their biographies and to treat them as writers without ideas. I saw my efforts as engagements with Fanon's thought rather than writing on him. A study of Karl Jaspers who, like Fanon, was a psychiatrist who wrote philosophical work in the middle of violent events, would be remiss if it offered only a biographical account. And even if such an endeavor were announced, the author would be expected to explain and evaluate Jaspers's *thought*. A similar concern would be raised in a biographical study of John Locke, another philosopher who was also a physician.

As a study of Western philosophy would seem odd if it focused on the philosophers but not their ideas, one on Africana philosophy requires also engaging the thought raised by such a constellation of thinkers. An additional difficulty is that this project involves the examination of thought by professional philosophers and contributions by other thinkers whose identity is not necessarily that of philosophers. For some professional philosophers such a path stimulates much suspicion. I recall an emeritus colleague's recount of his experience at an august American institution in the 1950s, when he consulted the director of graduate studies (DGS) about asking Paul Tillich to be his main advisor. The DGS responded, "Why do you want to work with him? He is a thinker, not a philosopher."

Africana philosophers could not afford to abandon thought for professional recognition. The road to inclusion continues to be a rocky one, with obstacles that include the inability of professional philosophy to affect the vision of many professional philosophers. In spite of philosophical demands on the category, it continues to be a stretch for many white philosophers to see Africana philosophers as human beings, and even more so as philosophers. This form of polite racism, in which Africana philosophers are often more tolerated than engaged, has occasioned an almost neurotic situation for Africana philosophers. Is there any way of responding to such behavior by custodians of reason other than by advancing reason? Would not such a response ultimately rely more on faith or devotion than anything else? This question of human minimum affects dynamics of appearance. Who are Africana philosophers? Who counts as an Africana philosopher? Is there Africana philosophy? If so, what is it? These kinds of question presuppose an initial absence. Introducing Africana philosophy is, to use a phrase wrought

with significance in the African diasporic context, an act of unveiling. Since the thought unveiled is one that has been around for some time, the tale to be told is one of disappearance as well as reappearance. But what returns is not exactly as it has been before. There was not, after all, a panoramic discussion of African diasporic philosophy as offered here. In effect, this organization of what has been is the advancement of something new.

Africana philosophy offers the appearance of a people with the articulation of ideas. Most of them are now in the pantheon of witnesses known in this tradition of thought as the ancestors. I hope I have done justice to them.

There are those among the living to whom I owe much gratitude. The first is Hilary Gaskin for her commitment to bringing this area of research to the oldest continuous publishing house. Her faith and patience are immeasurably appreciated. I presented some of the ideas in this book at the 2006 meeting of the Philosophy Born of Struggle Society conference at the New School University and then as a public lecture hosted by the Africana Studies Department, the Philosophy Department, and the Humanities Center at Stony Brook University. Thanks to J. Everet Green and Leonard Harris for organizing the former and David Clinton Wills and the welcoming community of colleagues at Stony Brook for the latter. I also presented some of these ideas through a series of lectures as the Metcalfe Chair in Philosophy at Marquette University that year and the Political Theory Workshop at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank the members of the philosophy department at Marquette, especially Michael Monahan, for their generosity and the theorists in the department of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, especially Anne Norton and Rogers Smith, for their valuable feedback. I also benefited from comments from the following scholars who read the manuscript closely: Molefi Asante, Myron Beasley, Doug Ficek, David Fryer, Leonard Harris, Paget Henry, Joan Jasak, Kenneth Knies, Anthony Monteiro, Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, Neil Roberts, Jean-Paul Rocchi, Susan Searls-Giroux, Kwasi Wiredu, and the anonymous referees at Cambridge University Press. The text also benefited from Shabbat discussions with Walter Isaac, Gregory Graham, Frank Castro, Qrescent Mason, Devon Johnson, Denene Wambach, and José Muniz.

No one, however, has read this text more closely and has offered more suggestions at every stage of the project than Tom Meyer and Jane Anna Gordon. Their eye for precision and abilities as the proverbial devil's

advocates have made them my most trusted colleagues at Temple. With Jane I am also fortunate that she has continued to be so much more, as the face I am lucky enough to see when I open my eyes each morning.

Thanks also to Mathieu, Jennifer, Sula, and Elijah Gordon for their love and patience as I devoted so much time to the completion of this book.

The two people to whom this book is dedicated are my mother and father. They have become ancestors. Through my brothers, children, and me, they continue to speak and remain loved.