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.

Lewis R. Gordon is the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Judaic Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia.
An Introduction to Africana Philosophy

LEWIS R. GORDON

Temple University
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 articula-
tion 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 immea-
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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.