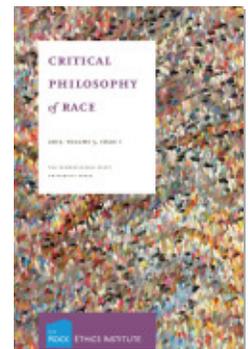On the Historiography of Africana Philosophy: Overcoming Disciplinary Decadence through the Teleological Suspension of Philosophy

Clevis Headley

ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICANA PHILOSOPHY

Overcoming Disciplinary Decadence through the Teleological Suspension of Philosophy

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Abstract

This article is a critical philosophical discussion of Lewis Gordon's *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Gordon in his text does not portray Africana philosophy as an abstract universalism, philosophy as the "view from nowhere" or philosophy as the "god's eye view" on reality. He also refrains from depicting Africana philosophy as a documentary description of Africana identity, thereby indicating a refusal on his part to reduce Africana philosophy to identity politics, to mere psycho-existential babble. Gordon critically engages with race in his text, but his involvement with this concept does not excessively dominate the text. This article critically explores Africana philosophy's involvement with postmodernism, as well as work through Gordon's notions of disciplinary decadence and the teleological suspension of philosophy. The basic analytical thrust endorses Gordon's efforts to represent Africana philosophy as, among other things, an existential phenomenological account of the being-in-the-world of Africana people. This approach represents Africana philosophy as an

anti-Cartesian philosophy, precisely because it does not emanate from a theoretically disembodied consciousness nor from an epistemic knowing subject in search of the transcendental foundations of knowledge.

Keywords: Africana philosophy, teleological suspension of philosophy, race, African diaspora, history

An Introduction to Africana Philosophy (Gordon 2008) is a major text in Lewis Gordon's remarkably productive and significant philosophical oeuvre precisely because its main concern centers on the very important issue of the historiography of Africana philosophy. A major objective of the current essay is to provide the hidden or implicit historiographical framework for Gordon's text. Gordon does not make explicit his own historiographical framing of Africana philosophy. This claim is not meant as a criticism of Gordon's text but, rather, to serve as an act of solidarity in the goal of promoting the undeniable significance and importance of Africana philosophy. To this end, the present essay is a hybrid philosophical text in that it functions both as a review, as well as a sympathetic and critical working through of some of the major themes of Lewis Gordon's philosophical writings. My strategy is to identify the historiography of Africana philosophy active in Gordon's text and then discuss how the concepts framing this historiography connect Africana philosophy to postmodernist philosophies. Perhaps it would not be too much of an exaggeration to consider Africana philosophy as both a historical anticipation of postmodern philosophy, as well as an instance of postmodern philosophy. I begin with an overview of Gordon's text, and a brief description of Gordon's notions of disciplinary decadence and the teleological suspension of disciplinarity. I then situate Gordon's intervention into the history of Africana philosophy, providing a review of Gordon's description of various construals of Africana philosophy, and offering an overview of some of the basic orientations of Africana philosophy discussed in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. At this juncture in my discussion, I return to the issue of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity and its relation to Africana philosophy. And, finally, I offer a critical assessment of the teleological suspension of philosophy, disciplinary decadence, and postmodernism. The essay's conclusion explores consequences for the historiography of Africana philosophy from the perspective of an ethical reading of postmodernist philosophy.

Overview of *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*

Gordon structures *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* as follows: The introduction entitled "Africana Philosophy in Context" represents Gordon's brief engagement with metaphilosophy since he critically reviews aspects of the historical conversation regarding the nature and definition of philosophy. Gordon pursues this exercise in order to register his conception of Africana philosophy as grounded in a conception of philosophy as emergent from "problems that stimulate critical reflection." Part 1, "Groundings," consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 discusses Africana philosophy as a modern philosophy, historically entangled with the conquest of the Americas and the trauma of the Atlantic slave trade. Chapter 2 focuses on classic eighteenth and nineteenth-century foundational texts by such writers as Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, David Walker, and Geore Wilmot Blyden, among others. Part 2, "From New World to the New Words," consists of four chapters. These chapters respectively represent the three sub-traditions of Africana philosophy, especially when the term "Africana Philosophy" is treated as a clearinghouse label. Chapter 3, "Three Pillars of African-American philosophy" discusses the work of Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon. Chapter 4, "Africana Philosophical Movements in the United States and Britain," considers such topics as prophetic pragmatism, Black feminism, Afrocentrism, African-American analytic philosophy, African-American continental philosophy, Black Marxism, and African-American existential philosophy and phenomenology. The main focus of chapter 5 is Afro-Caribbean philosophy. And, finally, chapter 6 discusses African philosophy, focusing on such issues as African humanism, the theme of invention, and recent African political thought.

It should be noted that Gordon explicitly identifies three major themes as dominating the historiography of Africana Philosophy: (1) philosophical anthropology, (2) freedom and liberation, and (3) metacritiques of reason. Broadly construed, philosophical anthropology concerns, among other things, philosophical investigation of human existence, specifically focusing on what it means to be human. This concern is important to Africana philosophy precisely because of the denial of African humanity and the attendant questions of identity emergent from this categorical, ontological condemnation: Who am I? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be African? The second theme of freedom and liberation is also of crucial significance for Africana philosophy precisely because of the historical struggles of Africana peoples to claim and affirm their creative human

agency against the forces of dehumanization and oppression. In addition, a major concern of thinkers, within the Africana philosophical tradition, has been to struggle for the creation of a better world; hence liberation, understood as active social and political transformation, has captured the imagination of Africana thinkers. Finally, the third theme of metacritiques of reason concerns what Gordon identifies as the core of Africana philosophical activities: the paradox of reason. By this he means "that reason must be able to evaluate itself, which means that it must transcend itself" (Gordon 2008, 249).

At this point I would like to interject that Gordon's acknowledgment of the singular role of the metacritique of reason in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* is intimately connected with my contention that Gordon's implicit metaphorical construction of the historiography of Africana philosophy is really his notion of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity. Indeed, this notion has played a canonical role in the developmental trajectory of Gordon's philosophical productions. Here it would be helpful to briefly explain the notions of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity and disciplinary decadence.

Origins of Gordon's Notions of the Teleological Suspension of Disciplinarity and Disciplinary Decadence

Gordon pioneered the notion of disciplinary decadence in his text *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Gordon 2006b). In this text, Gordon exploits the connotations associated with decadence—death, decay, and nihilism—as well as the original connotation associated with "discipline" as meaning "to educate." As is obvious, then, disciplinary decadence conjures up the idea of the decay and decline of education. Gordon specifically connects disciplinary decadence with the institutional organization of the various knowledge-producing traditions housed within universities. He defines disciplinary decadence as follows:

> Disciplinary decadence is the ontologizing or reification of a discipline. In such an attitude, we treat our discipline as though it was never born and has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die. More than immortal, it is eternal. Yet as something that came into being, it lives, in such an attitude, as a monstrosity, as an instance of human creation that can never die. Such a perspective

brings with it a special fallacy. Its assertion as absolute eventually leads to no room for other disciplinary perspectives, the result of which is the rejection of them for not being one's own. Thus, if one's discipline has foreclosed the question of its scope, all that is left for it is a form of "applied" work. Such work militates against thinking. (Gordon 2006b, 4–5)

After identifying disciplinary decadence as, among other things, a potentially corrosive threat to original thinking, Gordon isolates the antidote for it. His brave recommendation is to pursue a suspension of disciplinarity, in a manner similar to Kierkegaard's suspension of the ethical, ultimately to reclaim it in a transformed state. To be more specific, Gordon recommends a transcendence of disciplinarity and, more particularly, with regard to philosophy, a transcendence of philosophy. Gordon, in his earlier work, describes the act of *teleological suspension* as follows: "It is when a discipline suspends its own centering because of a commitment to questions greater than the discipline itself" (Gordon 2006b, 34).

Although I will later examine Gordon's discussion of the act of teleological suspension in his *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, the main point to take from our discussion thus far is that the act of teleological suspension is primarily the courage to think beyond the disciplinary boundaries of a discipline, to confront new and different questions, objects of inquiry, and methodologies, etc. With this background in place, I turn now to focus directly on Gordon's text.

Historiography of Africana Philosophy

Lewis Gordon, in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, does not portray Africana philosophy as an abstract universalism, philosophy as the "view from nowhere" or philosophy as the "god's eye view" on reality. He also refrains from depicting Africana philosophy as a documentary description of Africana identity, thereby indicating a refusal on his part to reduce Africana philosophy to identity politics, to mere psycho-existential babble. We find here no neurotic obsession with race, for Gordon does not engage those thinkers inclined to reduce Africana philosophy to an analytically crippled and irrational infatuation with race, a posture encouraged by the seductive semantic and ontological comforts of this concept. Of course,

Gordon critically engages with race in his text, but his involvement with this concept does not dictate the analytical thrust of the text. However, Gordon does appreciate the extent to which the idea of race inhabits the core of modern being, especially for those variously identified as black or African and for whom race is indeed a lived reality. It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to describe Gordon's efforts as an attempt to represent Africana philosophy as, among other things, a phenomenological account of the being-in-the–world of Africana people. This approach represents Africana philosophy as an anti-Cartesian philosophy, precisely because it does not emanate from a theoretically disembodied consciousness or from an epistemic knowing subject in search of the transcendental foundations of knowledge.

Since the historiography of Africana philosophy is one of my major concerns in this essay, I will critically engage some concerns that are arguably relevant to the historiography of philosophy, and, indirectly, to philosophy itself. One issue that is not directly tackled by Gordon is the aporia at the core of the discipline of philosophy. Bernasconi has referred to this phenomenon as the "paradox of philosophy's parochialism." Underscoring the seemingly contradictory claim of the universality of reason and the alleged Greek origin of philosophy, he asks, "What is one to make of the apparent tension between the alleged universality of reason and the fact that its upholders are so intent on localizing its historical instantiation?" (Bernasconi 1997, 213–14). The exclusion of Africa from histories of philosophy would seem to highlight the urgency of resolving this issue. Consequently, Gordon's project of writing a history of Africana philosophy would seem to invite a consideration of the topography of Africana philosophy, relative to the dialectic between universality and particularity. We recall that this issue dominated Sartre's famous, critical engagement with negritude philosophy.

As is often the case with critical intervention into the historiography of philosophy, this critical activity encourages a consideration of questions about the nature of philosophy. Indeed, it is precisely the historical probing of the history of philosophy that nudges scholars to involve themselves with metaphilosophical concerns, philosophical concerns relating to the nature of philosophy, or the notion of having a philosophical conception about philosophy. Peter Park in his recent study of the historiography of philosophy writes, "Philosophers use the history of philosophy to reaffirm the canon of philosophy in the sense . . . of the authors and texts that

define the discipline and to show philosophy's coherent and progressive development" (Park 2013, 1).

Absent from Gordon's text is the common practice of offering a necessary and sufficient definition of philosophy and then applying the established criteria of philosophy to demarcate real philosophy from nonphilosophy. Gordon admirably does not pursue this totalizing practice of reducing philosophy to sameness and, then, marginalizing as nonphilosophical discourse that fails to satisfy the criteria of real or proper philosophy. Closely related to this practice of applying a priori criteria to identity philosophy is the effort of seeking to establish the philosophical legitimacy of those systems of beliefs and styles of thinking that have been rejected as not being real philosophy, but considered as a descriptive catalog of the beliefs of a particular cultural or ethnic group. Gordon, it should be noted, resists becoming involved in the dialectics of recognition. His concern is not restricted to the task of making the case that Africana philosophy is real philosophy and, accordingly, should be judged as being equivalent with Western philosophy. As a matter of fact, as will be revealed during the course of this critical discussion, what emerges as of major significance in Gordon's case is his critical questioning of the disciplinary integrity of the dominant Western philosophical tradition and its practices of denigrating nonwestern intellectual traditions.

Gordon's text is historically significant for it serves two distinctive purposes, that of an introduction to Africana philosophy, and that of the first history of its kind in the modern period. As a text that enjoys unquestionable historical primacy, both temporal and intellectual, Gordon creatively utilizes various modes of discursive emplotment to construct his history of Africana philosophy. Indeed, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* is a tantalizing hybrid text by virtue of Gordon's skillful deployment of biographical sketches, intellectual biographical fragments, critical exegesis and commentary, and philosophical improvisational riffs reminiscent of jazz.

Gordon utilizes a method of temporal, as well as geographical, designation to structure his text. In discussing various traditions of Africana philosophy—African American philosophy, Africana philosophical movements in the United States and Great Britain, Afro-Caribbean philosophy, and African philosophy—Gordon offers an exceedingly rich constellation of ideas, thinkers, and texts. No reader will be disappointed with the encyclopedic gesture of reference to the ancestors. I will, however, forgo

any detailed account of the dense layers of discussion Gordon provides in the respective subfields of Africana philosophy. Instead I will address the more general issues of Gordon's understanding of Africana philosophy and his major historiographical trope. The issue of his understanding of Africana philosophy as a historical invention is relevant precisely because it determines his retrieval, construction, and at times, deconstruction and reconstruction of Africana philosophy. Since Gordon adopts a position of historicity with regard to Africana philosophy, we need to review his historically significant introduction of Africana philosophy.

Construals of Africana Philosophy

Gordon acknowledges various contextualizations of Africana philosophy, and this bold strategy allows him to portray Africana philosophy as an incomplete or open discursive formation. First, Gordon does not adopt a purist approach to Africana philosophy, that is, he does not view Africana philosophy as emergent from spontaneous abstract reflection. The distinctive feature of Africana philosophy is its emergence from the problems, contradictions, and challenges resulting from the clash of cultures and the struggle for material dominance. In grounding Africana philosophy in materiality rather than in some transcendental realm, Gordon declares that modern Africana philosophy has a double heritage. "The Atlantic slave trade," he maintains, "signaled the beginning of the 'modern' black diaspora and philosophical writings born from that historical development. It is in this sense, then, that Africana philosophy originates from medieval and modern contexts" (Gordon 2008, 18). The double heritage in question consists of the invention of "Africans" through an act of naming. Second, the Atlantic slave trade is part of this heritage for, to the extent that African peoples in being named "Africans" became the other of Christian Europe, this collective alterity aided in facilitating the enslavement of the radical Others of Europe known as Africans. We should note that the conquest of the Americas is another factor in the formation of Africana philosophy, for it was the conjunction of this reality and the Atlantic slave trade that set the stage for the emergence of a new world Africana consciousness.

A second orientation of Africana philosophy is the fact that it is, according to Gordon, a diasporic philosophy. He does not intend for the notion of diasporic to mean the dispersal of a homogeneous African

culture but, rather, as indicative of the shared historical and existential tribulations and traumas suffered by African peoples. In embracing this historical and culturally sensitive notion of diaspora, Gordon states that Africana philosophy is also defined by "the set of philosophical reflections that emerged by and through engagement with the African diaspora" (Gordon 2008, 157).

Philosophical anthropology is a third major disciplinary orientation shaping the profile of Africana philosophy. To the extent that Africana people have been forced to contend with the existential and political dimensions of dehumanization, Africana philosophy has displayed an almost obsessive concern with the question of what it means to be a human being. This question is inescapable for Africana consciousness because of the transcendental nature of the persistent forces of nonbeing that have shaped the very existence of African peoples. As Gordon writes, "Along with the questions outlined thus far, there is one that dominates much of Africana philosophy and has become increasingly central since early modern times, namely, 'what does it mean to be a human being'?" (Gordon 2008, 13)

Gordon reconfigures philosophical anthropology in order to capture its crucial significance in the context of Africana philosophy. In this context, philosophical anthropology is not limited to formal considerations of methodology but, rather, is motivated by conditions of existential praxis. With regard to Africana philosophy, Gordon insists that philosophical anthropology is important because "philosophical anthropology is central in an area of thought that is dedicated to the understanding of beings whose humanity has been called into question or challenged in the modern era" (Gordon 2008, 13).

Prior to describing the remaining elements in this outline of Africana philosophy, we should note that Gordon weaves together the diasporic and the philosophical anthropological, for he views them as theoretically complementary, so that this analytical blending reinforces the basic existential ontological structures of Africana philosophy. Indeed, Gordon states,

> Africana philosophy [is] an area of philosophical research that addresses the problems faced and raised by the African diaspora. Such an approach includes the centrality of philosophical anthropology. A reason for this focus is the historical fact of racism and colonialism in the modern era. Both phenomena led to the subordination of African

peoples in the modern world. This degraded status involves political and social scientific claims that pushed down and defined such people as lesser human beings, if as human beings at all. (Gordon 2008, 13–14)

A fourth dimension of Africana philosophy is its identification as a philosophy of existence. First, the existential thrust of Africana philosophy emerges from its focus on the concrete existence of the individual. As Gordon put its, "Africana philosophy examines what emerges from the question 'In reality who and what am I?' when posed by those who were actually enslaved and by those who lived the dubious status of a questioned humanity" (Gordon 2008, 35). It is the existential urgency of this question that has also involved Africana philosophers with questions dealing with "the centrality of such problem as the meaning of being human, the concept of freedom, and the limits of rationality" (Gordon 2008, 133).

Finally, Gordon summarizes the recurring themes that dominate the tradition of Africana philosophy, those themes that give it its unique philosophical identity. He writes: "Africana philosophy . . . explores problems of identity and social transformation, of the self and the social world, of consciousness and intersubjectivity, of the body and communicability, of ethics and politics, of freedom and bondage" (Gordon 2008, 14).

Orientations of Africana Philosophy

As stated at the beginning of this review, Gordon theoretically reduces the multiple orientations of Africana philosophy to three core ideas. These ideas provide the philosophical foundations for Africana philosophical activity. He claims that philosophical anthropology, liberation and social transformation, and reflective critique on the role of reason are the main undercurrents propelling the jet stream of Africana philosophy (Gordon 2008, 92 and 165).

The preceding discussion of the various orientations of Africana philosophy that are identified by Gordon clearly establishes the grounding of Africana philosophy in the concreteness of human existence. At the same time, its particularistic identification does not compromise its philosophical significance. Africana philosophy is a situated universality by virtue of the fact that it is another historical and cultural mediation of the universal.

In other words, the universal as universal is voiceless and acquires a voice from within particular historical communities. At the same time, it escapes being delimited by any particular community.

I indicated earlier that Gordon's text is not only the first introduction to Africana philosophy but is also the first modern history of Africana philosophy. Due to the canonical status of Gordon's text, it is not unreasonable to expect that this text would offer a direct and active engagement with historiographical questions about the writing of Africana philosophy. Gordon strategically does not explicitly address the historiographical concerns that emerge from writing the first history of Africana philosophy, that is, questions pertaining to the representation and interpretation of the numerous texts that are constitutive of this narrative history of Africana philosophy, and questions regarding the method of periodization and canonical preferences. There is, however, an implicit historiographical undercurrent driving the discursive development of Gordon's text. Gordon's novel approach is evident in his strategy of connecting the historiography of Africana philosophy with the disciplinarity of philosophy itself.

The Teleological Suspension of Philosophy and Disciplinary Decadence

There is indeed a tacit historiographical agenda propelling Gordon's text. In writing *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, Gordon could not have afforded to evade the challenge of deciding on a particular narrative framework, on settling on a basic theoretical orientation to structure his narrative of Africana philosophy. Any close reading of the work will reveal Gordon's astute utilization of his notion of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity to present his introduction to Africana philosophy. In short, what we have, then, is a theoretical framework for introducing and representing Africana philosophy. In other words, the historical grounding of Africana philosophy is the teleological suspension of philosophical disciplinarity. Indeed, Gordon's extensive use of the notion of the teleological suspension of philosophy constitutes his execution of a Kierkergaardian historiography of Africana philosophy. This Kierkegaardian historiography, as will be made clear, supports the idea of philosophy as open and as incomplete.

Gordon also identifies the notion of disciplinary decadence, stating that disciplinary decadence involves aborting the ethical potential of Self-Other

relationships. This compromising of Self-Other reciprocity occurs when circumstances elevate one discipline as foundational, so that all other disciplines are viewed as inadequate relative to this privileged one. It is further assumed that the methodologies and resources of the privileged discipline are superior to those of the inferior disciplines. A certain policing activity is instituted, whereby a dominant discipline determines what is and what is not acceptable. Acceptable disciplines are those that embrace the methods established by the dominant discipline.

Clearly, then, a pernicious feature of disciplinary decadence, as consistent with Gordon's account, is disciplinary reductionism. This attitude takes the form of reducing other disciplines into one's disciplinary perspective. We are familiar with literary scholars denouncing social scientists for failing to be sufficiently literate, social scientists in turn accusing literary scholars of not being appropriately appreciative of the benefits of being socially scientific, and finally, natural scientists chastising humanities scholars for lacking scientific rigor (Gordon 2006b, 35).

It is fair to state, as previously mentioned, that Gordon considers disciplinarity to be decadent precisely because it prevents the invention of different objects of inquiry, insights, and truths. In other words, disciplinary decadence obstructs an opening to the other, namely, to other disciplines, methods of investigation, interpretations, and new questions. For Gordon, the solution to disciplinary decadence is a suspension of disciplinarity.

Following Kierkegaard's notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical, a transcending of the universal in order to apprehend an ethics that cannot be contained in universal categories, Gordon subscribes to what he calls the teleological suspension of disciplinarity. He states that the teleological suspension of disciplinarity "involves taking the risk of suspending the ontological priority of one's field or discipline for the sake of a greater purpose or cause" (Gordon 2006a, 35).

In his *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, Gordon presents Africana philosophy as a philosophy that ironically suspends philosophy in order to recover a more inclusive and liberatory conception of philosophy, one that more adequately reflects Africana existence. I turn now to establish the dominance of the idea of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity in shaping and structuring Gordon's presentation of Africana philosophy.

It bears noting that Gordon's conception of Africana philosophy involves him in Africana metaphilosophical reflection, for he admits to the fact that this conception involves the application of the Africana conception

of philosophy to Africana philosophy itself. It is a critical reflection on Africana consciousness by Africana consciousness. This metaphilosophical stance yields a conception of Africana philosophy that is beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries. Gordon states, "Africana metaphilosophy faces the paradox that Africana philosophy is a living philosophy because many of its practitioners are willing to think beyond philosophy. . . . The term I use in my own work . . . is a 'teleological suspension of philosophy,' which, paradoxically, generates new philosophy by going beyond philosophy" (Gordon 2008, 14).

Regarding the ethical discernibility of the teleological suspension of philosophy, Gordon identifies Frantz Fanon as an Africana thinker whose work is, among other things, "guided by the challenge of freedom and the constraints placed on searching for it in the modern world. His aims led to what I call a teleological suspension of philosophy"(Gordon, 2008, 82). Since philosophy collapses under the weight of its grand desire to be absolute, the absoluteness of reason, and philosophy's desire to become greater than itself, Gordon concludes that Fanon insightfully "understood that philosophy could best be salvaged by our willingness to transcend it" (Gordon 2008, 82).

Gordon advances the idea of an Africana philosophy that suspends disciplinarity, a philosophy that escapes decadence and that is highly receptive to epistemological possibilities beyond the discipline of philosophy. Africana philosophy, emerging in the metacontext of the teleological suspension of philosophy, is a living and evolving philosophy, deeply grounded in the thick existential ether of existence. Furthermore, in the context of the Africana philosophical tradition, Africana philosophers have been willing to sacrifice the disciplinary purity of philosophy for the sake of pursuing issues whose importance transcends unproductive commitments to disciplinary methods. Hence Gordon declares that, "In the case of philosophy, its disciplinary suspension—enables the cultivation of new philosophy. [Africana philosophy], from this point of view, is the construction of new philosophy through [Africana philosophers'] willingness to go beyond philosophy, paradoxically, for the sake of philosophy" (Gordon 2008, 183).

This emphasis on the teleological suspension of philosophy for the sake of avoiding disciplinary decadence and epistemic closure is an embrace of disciplinary transcendence, which is essentially an affirmation of otherness. Gordon clearly states, "Being Africana does not exclude being something else" (Gordon 2008, 189) and, in another context, he writes,

> [Disciplinary] decay affects the construction and production of knowledge. When decadent, knowledge becomes deontological and stagnant; life and thinking require a "teleological suspension" of disciplinary commitments, where disciplines must be transcended for the sake of reality. (Gordon 2008, 144)

It should be noted that, consistent with the theme of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity, Gordon does not limit the texts of Africana philosophy only to texts produced by professional philosophers. He includes texts produced in other disciples as being bona fide Africana philosophical texts. Africana philosophy is embedded in multiple disciplinary contexts.

We are well positioned to briefly summarize the preceding discussion: Gordon utilizes the idea of teleological suspension to promote a conception of Africana philosophy premised on the notion that conceptions of philosophy are open to revision precisely because they are formulated by existing individuals who are in the process of becoming, individuals constrained by the unpredictability of time and the uncertainty generated by the awareness and limitations of human finitude. African philosophers actively pursue a teleological suspension of institutionalized and mainstream disciplinary philosophy in order to loosen up its methods, assumptions, and principles to prevent philosophy from becoming dogmatic, rigid, insensitive, and deaf to the voices of those who turn to philosophy as a source of liberation and redemption. Therefore, by emphasizing existence, contingency, and becoming, the message given is that disciplinary responsibility demands that conceptions of philosophy remain open to revision. In short, the idea of 'suspension' is not a rejection of philosophy but, rather, a reconfiguration of philosophy.

Critically Assessing Gordon's Teleological Suspension of Philosophy

I turn now to critically assess Gordon's cautious skepticism of Africana philosophy's involvement with postmodernist thought. My claim is that if, as Gordon claims, Africana philosophy represents a teleological suspension of disciplinarity and of philosophy in order to avoid disciplinary decadence and epistemic closure, then Africana philosophy would also have

to remain open to reciprocal constructive engagement with postmodernist thought. Put differently, there must be possibilities of solidarity between Africana philosophy and postmodernist thought. Here, the point is not to intimate that Africana philosophers should entangle themselves in the web of the dialectics of recognition. Rather, I am suggesting that a living and flourishing Africana philosophy that avoids disciplinary decadence should also be responsive to ideas and methods from multiple sources, not only different disciplines but also different traditions of philosophy. As is the case when transcending philosophy only to reclaim it, it should also be possible to transcend a tradition in order to reclaim that same tradition while reconfiguring it.

In *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, Gordon describes Afro-postmodernism in a language closely associated with common criticisms of postmodernism. He writes,

> The main thrust of Afro-postmodernism is a radical anti-essentialism, which leads to the rejection of all "masternarratives," and leaves no alternative for intellectual work but that of textual or cultural criticism. This is a function of the anti-foundationalism of the postmodernist turn. Yet the question emerges of how one can build new ideas through a commitment to criticism only. Would not the only creative options be that of style or technique? Even where one shows that an argument is logically flawed, one cannot, in this view, take that conclusion as a consequence with any bearing on reality. There are some ironic results of this. First, the turn to postmodern criticism has produced a body of literature . . . which constitutes a philosophy. . . . Is this not an imposition of a master narrative . . . over these texts? If this is so, would not, then, the notion of an Afro-postmodern philosophy be a contradiction of terms? And if so, would not the turn to postmodern critique mean, then, the abrogation of philosophy? These questions lead to more unsettling ones. For instance, postmodernism is marked by strong anti-humanist commitments. . . . Yet there is no black philosophical text, as I have been arguing since the introduction of this book, that lacks an appeal to some kind of humanism or to the humanity of black people, often defended in the form of a philosophical anthropology. The obvious reason for this is that these texts are being written by people whose domination is marked by their dehumanization: it would be contradictory for them to fight for a humanity that they must reject. (Gordon 2008, 122–23)

It seems that Gordon, in raising the critical questions above, is utilizing a hyperrational mode of analysis to expose basic logical contradictions in postmodernist thinking. However, considering the importance of Africana philosophy and Gordon's own position on the teleological suspension of philosophy, this popular mode of analysis can block productive lines of collaboration between Africana philosophy and postmodernist thought. Affirmative possibilities of mutual exchange can be realized once Africana philosophers acknowledge the ethical thrust of postmodernist thought, the ethical understood as responsibility for the other, as well as an opening toward the other and toward difference. It seems to me that this perspective is, indeed, not only compatible with the core principles of Africana philosophy, as described by Gordon, but also explicitly endorsed by them.

However, in order to establish this seemingly intimate bound of compatibility, it is necessary to briefly review Derrida's take on deconstruction. This brief examination of his account of deconstruction, particularly the idea of deconstruction as ethics, undeniably establishes the compatibility between Gordon's historiography of Africana philosophy as an instance of the teleological suspension of disciplinarity and postmodern philosophy.

It bears noting that the very idea of postmodernism as, in some sense, related to Africana philosophy has been previously promoted by Robert Young and Pal Ahluwalia. Young writes, "If 'so-called postsructuralism' is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence—no doubt itself both a symptom and a product. In this respect it is significant that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, and Lyotard, among others, were all either born in Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war" (Young 1990, 1). And Ahluwalia, in his *Out of Africa: Post-structuralism's Colonial Roots*, states: "It is my contention that, in order to understand the project of . . . post-structuralism, it is imperative both to contextualize the African colonial experience and to highlight the Algerian locatedness, identity and heritage of its leading proponents" (Ahluwalia 2010, 3).

Deconstruction, Derrida states, is "no centralizing power of mastery and domination," but an "openness towards the other" (Derrida 1984, 125). Mindful of the various charges of nihilism, indeterminism, and relativism directed at him, he does not embrace the notion of deconstruction as an enclosure; rather, Derrida talks in terms of deconstruction as an openness. Hence, he states, "Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other" (Derrida 1984, 125). Similarly, Derrida counters the charge that deconstruction encourages a nihilistic free play

of interpretation. He responds that "one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or being encouraged to say, just anything at all nor have I argued for indeterminacy as such" (Derrida 1988, 124). There is also the accusation that deconstruction traffics in a negative and destructive practice of dismantling texts and structures, while not offering any positive alternative to replace what is discredited. Derrida admits to deconstruction's interest in systems but denies the accusation that it is merely concerned with bringing down systems. Finally, he construes deconstruction as opening systems to what they are inclined to exclude, denigrate, marginalize, and denounce. "Deconstruction," according to Derrida, "concerns, first of all systems. This does not mean that it brings down the system, but that it opens onto possibilities of arrangements or assembling, of being together if you like, that are not necessarily systematic" (Derrida 1995, 212).

In saying that deconstruction is ethics, we are saying that Derrida embraces the Levinasian idea that ethics is a relation to the other. And within the context of Derrida's thinking, deconstruction as ethics means a concern not only for the other as a person but also for the other of language, the other readings of texts and the other of tradition, etc. Derrida enthusiastically endorses the phenomenological grounding of the opening to the other as ethics.

To the extent that Derrida grafts deconstruction with ethics, this move implies that the other, from the perspective of deconstruction, anticipates philosophy and is not parasitic on philosophy. Indeed, we recall that, for Levinas, the totalizing and marginalizing practices of philosophy are in conflict with ethics, which is a matter of being in relation with the other. Thus, Derrida announces, "The other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin. It is in this rapport with the other that affirmation expresses itself" (Derrida 1984, 118).

Derrida ultimately weaves together ethics and deconstructive practice. When ethics informs deconstruction, deconstruction becomes an intervention, an intervention on behalf, as well as toward, the other. Accordingly, Derrida maintains that a deconstructive "intervention can consist only in opening, uncloseting, destabilizing foreclosionary structures so as to allow for the passage towards the other"(Derrida 1989, 59–60). Let us turn now to briefly review the relation between deconstruction and disciplinarity.

Taking the preceding discussion into consideration, it is undeniable that one interesting area of agreement between Gordon and Derrida, a development that further corroborates the complementary aspects of their

thinking, relates to Gordon's notions of disciplinary decadence and the act of teleological suspension.

I am not suggesting that Gordon's view is interesting only because his views are consistent with views similarly expressed by Derrida. In other words, I am not using Derrida to make Gordon's view legitimate. Rather, my aim is to underscore the astounding ethical parallels in their respective projects. Like Gordon, we find also in Derrida not a call for the destruction of disciplines but, rather, a transcending or suspension of disciplinarity that often functions dictatorially in policing the borders of the various disciplines. Derrida writes,

> But at the same time I emphasized the necessity of discipline, of something specifically philosophical, that we should not dissolve philosophy into other disciplines, that we need at the same time interdisciplinarity, crossing the borders, establishing new themes, new problems, new ways, new approaches to new problems, all the while teaching the history of philosophy, the techniques, professional rigor, what one calls discipline. I do not think we need to choose between the two. We should have philosophers trained as philosophers, as rigorously as possible, and at the same time audacious philosophers who cross the borders and discover new connections, new fields, not only interdisciplinary researches but themes that are not even interdisciplinary. . . . [W]hen you discover a new object, an object that up until now has not been identified as such, or has no legitimacy in terms of academic fields, then you have to invent a new competency, a new type of research, a new discipline. (Derrida 1997, 7–8)

Clearly there is a genuine complementarity between Gordon's teleological suspension of disciplinarity and Derrida's deconstruction, particularly, deconstruction committed to an understanding of ethics as openness to and responsibility for the Other.

Conclusion

I want to end by considering some of the consequences for Africana philosophy and historiography from the perspective of an ethical reading of postmodernist philosophies. I believe that ethical readings of postmodernist

philosophies reveal that this tradition of thought rejects the notion of a pure transcendental subjectivity. This rejection of a pure constituting consciousness is not meant to deny the existence of subjects who are embodied consciousnesses, who are historically situated. Indeed, the very notion of the embodiment of subjectivity is intimately at home within Africana philosophy to the extent that it connotes the idea of the historical constructivity of subjectivity. Consider, for example, that there were no subjects who answered to the description of "African" prior to the invention of Africa as a discursive formation, conjoined with various political and economic agendas. Of course, I am not endorsing a misleading construal of postmodernist thought that reduces subjectivity to merely the discursive. Any enthusiastic embrace of free-floating textualism, of fantasies of spontaneously invented subjectivity, and of delusional linguistic idealism should be rejected. Certainly, there is much to be gained from operating with a grammar of subjectivity, whose basic vocabulary includes such notions as situatedness, positionality, constructivity, and embodiment. This move obviously connotes an awareness of the interdependence of subjectivity, but not subjectivity understood as dependent only upon language. Rather, it is a subjectivity that emerges from the dynamic affects of material forces in the world.

Furthermore, consider the importance of the notion of subjectivity, particularly when understood as being historically constructed and as embodied consciousness, for Africana philosophy, a philosophical tradition that must contend with three major sub-traditions: African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean. Any productive notion of an Africana "we," any attempt to speak in terms of a cross-diasporic intersubjectivity, can appreciably benefit tremendously from acknowledging the contingency of subjectivity and the contestability that attends the very notion of an Africana existence.

Similarly, the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives, when read ethically, is really a defense of difference and otherness against the terror of sameness and the totalization of thought that seeks to think reality only in terms of some transcendental signified. Indeed, history structured on the basis of grand narrative invokes a linear logic of necessary development that has been detrimental to Africana existence. Linear developmental conceptions of history always relegate Africana peoples to the primordial origins of human development where they remain temporally restricted in some infinite natal condition of being, in a time before conscious time. The ethical thrust of displacing metanarratives is to produce a space in which

the voices of those marginalized and rendered invisible by the logic of historical, developmental linearity can be heard.

Therefore, instead of creating a situation of nonreciprocal objectification, one can confidently and enthusiastically embrace Gordon's calls for the teleological suspension of disciplinary decadence and actively urge a greater creative involvement between Africana philosophy and postmodernist philosophical traditions in philosophy. This development would enable these traditions and the Africana tradition to become entangled in substantive philosophical endeavors, in a cross-fertilization of consciousnesses that will further the project of human flourishing. Furthermore, this kind of inclusivity would obviously contribute toward a more hospitable attitude of welcoming the plurality of philosophical perspectives and orientations consistent with a reconfigured conception of philosophy.

Africana philosophers owe Gordon a collective debt of gratitude precisely because of his pioneering and imaginative introduction of Africana philosophy and its historiography to those with an interest in this tradition of philosophy. Furthermore, he also deserves credit for providing Africana philosophers with the opportunity to establish constructive engagement with postmodern philosophy, as they avoid the seductive lure of disciplinary decadence.

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