

# APA Newsletters

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## NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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# Philosophy and the Black Experience

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John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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## FROM THE EDITORS

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Next year marks the 40th anniversary of Angela Davis' seminal text *If They Come in the Morning*. At the time of the release of this book, Angela Davis became an icon of the African American liberation struggle and the emerging Black feminist movement. In his article, "Angela Davis: Marxist Philosophy, Patricia Hill Collins, and the Matter of Black Feminist Thought," McClendon examines Angela Davis as a Marxist and Black feminist philosopher. The immediate motivation for his article is the fact that he discovered that many of his students are, sadly to say, unaware of Davis' monumental legacy.

Also in this edition of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, we are pleased to have an article by Everett Green entitled "Monopoly Intellectualism." In the article, Green calls into question the ideal of intellectual multiculturalism, as if ideas in the light of their sheer brilliance make their way into the market place of ideas. Indeed, Green locates the problem of epistemic diversity at the heart of monopoly intellectualism, which is linked to the maintenance of the social order. Hence, Green provides an analysis of the dissemination of knowledge, the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge, as a function of those gatekeepers invested in maintaining economic and political power. He locates the force and operation of this power within higher education and throughout the broader educational ethos within the U.S. His suggestion is that if things are to change then the very heart of the State apparatus must be critiqued. This, according to Green, will have a systemic impact on the "legitimacy" of existing social arrangements.

Lastly, we are also happy to include Kathy Glass' review of Linda Furgerson Selzer's groundbreaking book entitled *Charles Johnson in Context*. Selzer's book does an excellent job of situating Johnson's work within the context of African American philosophy, Buddhism, Marxism, and cosmopolitanism. Her work is philosophically astute and historically rich.

It is also with great sadness that we acknowledge the passing of philosopher Robert A. CheeMooke. In a personal correspondence (December 12, 2010), Robert E. Birt, who had the pleasure and honor of studying with CheeMooke, shared the following:

While at Morgan State University, I took at least three classes with him, including a class called "Philosophy of Protest" and "Philosophical Examinations of Slavery." While I discovered Frantz Fanon due to the influence of the Movement (especially the Black Panthers), CheeMooke was the first professor under whom I did formal study of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It was under CheeMooke that I also first read Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. And he was our faculty advisor when Morgan's Philosophy Club brought Harold Cruse to speak at Morgan. CheeMooke also introduced me and other students to the writings of Albert Memmi and Aime Cesaire. He was apparently a friend of Stokely Carmichael while he was still a philosophy student at Howard University. And he was also an acquaintance of C.L.R. James. When I returned to Baltimore from Texas in 1991, CheeMooke shared with me by telephone a very interesting paper in progress which he titled "The African-American in the American Intellectual Tradition." I hope that paper (whether completed or not) has not been lost. Robert Augustine CheeMooke will be missed.

The following is an obituary found at <http://omniclassifieds.com/ad/6538>:

CHEEMOOKE: ROBERT A (CHEE), Former deputy mayor of Port-of-Spain, passed away of cardiac arrest on Tuesday September 28, 2010 at Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Robert was born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad on October 16, 1939 to Daphne (dec) and Augustus (Boysie) CheeMooke (dec). He leaves to mourn Linda Plaisance CheeMooke and daughter Fatima. Sisters Agnes (dec), Yvonne, Shirley and Cheryl (dec). Brothers George (Dorian) dec, Ivan, Leon (Taffari), Frank and Patrick. Nephew of Norma Chacha (dec) and James (dec) and Kim Townsend (dec). Cousin of Leo Hoyte (dec), Ronald Lashley, Lyle Townsend, Barry Townsend (dec), Lana Gittens, David Als, Michael Als and a host of others. Uncle of Karen Camejo, Donna Thomas-Hosten, Paula Maselino, Natalie Phillips, Simone Phillips, Sharon Clarke, Sherma Clarke, Richard Thomas (dec), Gregory McAlpin (dec), Garth McAlpin, Ian and Phillip Joseph, and Stokeley Phillips. Great uncle of Michal Pilar, Nyssa, Rashida, Hasante, Vanessa, Sapphire, Neffer, Sudan, Tigana, Hashim, Omar and Chad. Friend of Mervyn Campbell, Peter Pouchet, Godfrey Gordon, Kenneth Rivas, Napoleon Turner, Calvie Griffith, Mervyn Mohammad, Ray MaDoo, Professor Otto Begus, Professor Alex Hook, the Plaisance family and a host of others. Past pupil of Nelson Street Boys RC, Fatima College and Howard University in Washington, DC where he received a BS degree in Chemistry and a MS degree in Philosophy as well as a PhD from John Hopkins University. He was the former Philosophy Professor at Morgan State University, Coppin State University and Stephenson University. Faculty Advisor to the Philosophy Club at both Morgan State and Stephenson Universities and was awarded an "Excellence in Teaching Award in 2001" from Villa Julie College (Stephenson University). He was a life-time supporter of Trinidad All Stars Steel Band and his favourite Calypsonian was Shadow. He was also the City's representative for Down Town Carnival during his term on the City Council.

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## ARTICLES

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### **Angela Davis: Marxist Philosophy, Patricia Hill Collins, and the Matter of Black Feminist Thought**

**John H. McClendon III**  
*Michigan State University*

I was very recently teaching a philosophy class and mentioned that in addition to Eugene C. Holmes, the long-time Howard University scholar, that Angela Davis was also one of few professional Black philosophers to have adopted Marxist philosophy. To my surprise, less than a handful of students knew of Angela Davis, let alone her role as philosopher and activist in the African American liberation movement.<sup>1</sup>

I immediately assigned a student to give a presentation on Davis that would outline her significance as a scholar and activist. The motivation for publishing this paper derives from this particular classroom experience. As a philosophy professor, I am concerned with the representation of the African American philosophical tradition and I think that Angela Davis has a unique and valuable location within it. After reading this essay, perhaps the present generation of students of the African American philosophical tradition can gain a measure of substantive knowledge of Angela Davis as a Marxist philosopher and proponent of Black feminist thought.

In her article “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation,” Angela Davis examines the nature of women’s oppression by consciously drawing on the works of Karl Marx. In this aforementioned article, Davis attacks the theoretical weaknesses associated with the failure of feminists (particularly middle class white women activists) to link women’s oppression to other forms of oppression besides patriarchy as well as various social movements outside of the feminist formations. Davis is keenly aware of the ideological limitations of bourgeois feminism and critically accounts for its errors from the standpoint of Marxist philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Angela Davis drew upon Marx’s materialist conception of history to uncover the theoretical weaknesses ancillary to white middle class women’s feminist thought. This theoretical weakness stemmed from a particular form of feminist thought that in its reductionism rendered all forms of oppression and exploitation as manifestations of male supremacy (sexism). Davis continually demonstrated that women’s oppression is contemporarily grounded in capitalist relations though carefully demarcating the differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of women’s oppression in her historical examination of those conditions.<sup>3</sup>

By the time Davis offers her book review of Patricia Hill Collins in 1993, we discover her critical insights from Marx are glaringly absent. Could it be that Davis’ departure from the Communist Party USA in 1991 also signaled her break with Marxist-Leninist philosophy? Has Davis abandoned Marxism as well as her earlier views on feminism? Or does Davis now assume a different philosophical position because the matter at hand is Black feminist thought and not white feminism?

Before we can adequately answer the above questions, it is imperative that I undertake a critical inquiry into Patricia Hill Collins’ philosophical position. Hill Collins’ philosophical position is not straightforwardly a systematic one; rather, it comprises an eclectic mixture of mutually exclusive theses, propositions, and conjectures. Of immediate import, to our

discussion, is the fact that Hill Collins openly rejects Marxism as a viable theoretical framework, and on this point, we find, Davis remains surprisingly silent.

Patricia Hill Collins argues, “[Material] conditions of race, class and gender oppression can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies of subordinate groups. Thus, the significance of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology enriches our understanding of how subordinated groups create knowledge that fosters resistance.”<sup>4</sup>

Let us, for now, ignore the viability of Hill Collins’ merger of Afrocentrism and feminism into an integral epistemology. Instead, let us immediately take note of Hill Collins’ presupposition that knowledge is created rather than discovered from examining objective material conditions. This presupposition clearly indicates that she is committed to a social constructivist conception of knowledge. From a materialist perspective, two very significant outcomes emerge from this social constructivist theory.

One, social constructivism denotes conventionalism wherein the denial of objective knowledge and objective truth is an immediate result. Two, social constructivism in its emphasis on social context as the primary determination for knowledge conflates and reduces the contextual basis for social consciousness, as a more *general* category, with the *specific features* of knowledge as a *particular form* of social consciousness. While all forms of social consciousness derive from definite social contexts, the specificity of the content, which constitutes knowledge, must be differentiated from other forms of social consciousness and determinately established as epistemé or knowledge.

What follows from the latter point is Hill Collins’ failure to demarcate how *knowledge* that fosters resistance differs from, let’s say, *religious beliefs*, which are rooted in fideism and are not epistemologically grounded. Nevertheless, although religious beliefs are forms of social consciousness, which foster resistance, they do not constitute knowledge. Hence, the act (or acts) of resistance need not be informed by knowledge. Various kinds of beliefs can have utility and function as catalysts for revolts, resistance, and rebellions. In African American history, the rise of resistance struggles often resulted from an act (or acts) of religious faith rather than knowledge. Different material conditions surrounding class, race, and gender need not alter common beliefs, outside of the realm of knowledge, such as a common religious faith.

Indeed, we discover that, unlike Hill Collins, Angela Davis, in her article “Unfinished Lectures on Liberation,” makes this crucial point about fideism, Christianity, and resistance. Davis states, “Freedom, liberation, the abolition of slavery, the elimination of human alienation—all these notions receive a metaphysical foundation through religion. A supernatural being wills the abolition of slavery and [Frederick] Douglass, slave and believer, must execute God’s will by striving toward the aim of liberation. Of course, he was not alone in his efforts to forge a theology of liberation on the basis of Christian doctrine. Nat Turner’s rebellion and John Brown’s attack were among the innumerable anti-slavery actions directly inspired by Christianity.”<sup>5</sup>

Hill Collins tells us nothing about how resistance drawing from subjugated “knowledge” differs from the resistance emanating from subjugated “faith.” The sociology of knowledge and the sociology of faith, *prima facie*, on Hill Collins’ account, concomitantly mark the same path. However, epistemology does not have faith or unjustified beliefs as its subject matter, rather the domain of epistemology are theories of *knowledge* as justified belief. Consequently, Hill Collins conflates fideism and other forms of social consciousness with knowledge.

Hill Collins' empiricist assumptions, which undergird her social constructivism, are all the more paradoxical given the fact that positivism, which her constructivism overtly opposes, starts from the same premises via the verification principle. While positivism wrestles with the relationship of observational and theoretical language and accents the former, the so-called social epistemologists give primacy to lived experience as the (phenomenological) foundation of epistemology. Positivism and social constructivism constrain knowledge to the realm of phenomena, i.e., to the appearances revealed in experience thus overlooking the essence behind phenomenal appearances.

Patricia Hill Collins, in her attempts at an elaboration of a Black Feminist epistemology, given her phenomenological foundationalism, includes a criticism of positivism. Nevertheless her critique is rather weak and half-hearted; indeed, Hill Collins demonstrates a certain ambiguity toward positivism. She argues,

The criteria for the methodological adequacy of positivism illustrate the epistemological standards that Black women scholars would have to satisfy in legitimating Black feminist thought using a Eurocentric masculinist epistemology...[M]y focus on positivism should not be interpreted to mean that all dimensions of positivism are inherently problematic for Black women nor that nonpositivist frameworks are better.<sup>6</sup>

If we return to the above citation then it becomes evident that located in the first part is the central problem, viz., the methodological adequacy of positivism for Black feminist thought. This problem directly relates to the issue of the epistemological standards by which Black women scholars would necessarily have to satisfy to establish a legitimate Black feminist epistemology. What ensues from this problem is Hill Collins' assumption that positivism is both Eurocentric and masculinist. Can we gather from the above that the presumption of Eurocentric and masculinist biases are intrinsic to positivism, thus rendering it mutually exclusive and hence foreign to Hill Collins' proposed Afrocentric/feminist epistemology?

On first glance it seems to be the case; why, after all, point out the problems attendant to positivism with respect to criteria for the an Afrocentric feminist epistemology? Yet, Hill Collins brings to our attention a very salient point; her focus on positivism should not be interpreted to mean that all dimensions of positivism are inherently problematic for Black women and especially respecting their quest to formulate a relevant and distinctive epistemology. For that matter, we ought not assume non-positivist frameworks serve as better epistemologies than what can be harvested from positivism.

So why bother to elaborate an Afrocentric/feminist epistemology? Why not embrace Afrocentric/feminist positivism? All it would require is to adopt those portions of positivism which are not "inherently problematic" for Black women. Since non-positivist epistemologies may not serve Black women any better than positivism, perhaps the unproblematic portions of positivism are safer, if not better, grounds for a Black feminist epistemology?

Yet we find positivism, on the one hand, via this methodological adequacy test, forces Black women to accept what would constitute their distinctive "epistemological" position as ultimately an illegitimate one. Furthermore, this constraint is the immediate upshot of Eurocentric and masculinist biases embodied in positivism as an epistemology. On the other hand, we have the argument that positivism in all of its dimensions is not inherently problematic for Black

women. And for that matter, the non-positivist frameworks are not any better than positivism for establishing a Black feminist epistemology. These conflicting assumptions, with respect to positivism, are why I argue Hill Collins' critique of positivism is weak and indeed ambiguous.

Here we see Hill Collins' epistemological relativism drains and undermines the very substance of her Black feminist epistemology. The earlier and latter segments of the citation are contradictory and it pushes Hill Collins into what can be simply described as an epistemological quagmire. What is the basis for establishing a Black feminist epistemology if the available choices have equal warrants, albeit the choice of positivism is tainted with biases? What we have, in effect, is something akin to Kantian antinomies, antithetical propositions of equal validity. For, despite the masculinist and racist biases attached to positivism, there are those aspects of positivism which are unproblematic with respect to Black feminist epistemology.

What then are the unproblematic dimensions of positivism? Hill Collins unfortunately does not answer this question. There is a noticeable silence, which becomes all the more glaring since Hill Collins refuses to totally discard positivism, although she de facto rejects it in her actual formulations of Black feminist epistemology. Does the failure to discern what is of value from that which is not of any value in positivism ultimately entail throwing the baby out with the bath water? If this is so, it is important to know why Hill Collins insists on asserting there are unproblematic aspects of positivism. This, I contend, is an indispensable epistemological condition for such an assertion, and consequently mandates a direct answer to the question.

Perhaps, her ambiguity is due to the fact that positivism and social constructivism each respectively constitute a species of empiricism, which, in line, rest on conventionalism. We discover both are examples of subjective idealism. Hence, they *ontologically* deny objective reality and *epistemologically* discard the idea of objective truth. The philosopher of science Robert Klee, with respect to positivism, reports how these two features are so manifested. "The positivists held that scientific theory is a linguistic representation, *not of external reality*...but of actual and possible human experience."<sup>7</sup> [Italics added]

He then adds this important insight about positivist epistemology,

The positivists were radical empiricists in the spirit of the British philosopher David Hume, and they saw the anatomy of scientific theories through the filter of Humean principles. What theory does is to capture in linguistic form the causal regularities that hold within a domain of phenomena.<sup>8</sup>

Positivism, unlike materialism, reduces the cause/effect relation to the status of conventional regularity. Since knowledge is not anchored to "external reality" or human experience then objective reality accedes to the conventions and constructions molded out of experience. Hill Collins, in sequence, refers to various "oppressed groups" and their attendant "subjugated knowledges" and calls for a dialogical conception of truth. Collins argues that "with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, [it] thus becomes closer to the most 'objective' truth." Hill Collins' use of scare quotes effectively indicates what amounts to the denial of objective truth. She further explains,

Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or

suppressing other groups' partial perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

So instead of objective truth, grounded in material reality, we have a notion of truth founded on consensus. Consequently, this broader truth derives from various partial truths as situated knowledges. Hill Collins seems to suggest it is only by means of the aggregation of partial perspectives and hence partial truths are we thus able to embark upon the path to wider truth. We, in turn, must embrace this wider truth, which is born of consensus, in lieu of the fact that for us there is no real possibility in obtaining objective truth itself.

Hill Collins' conception of truth as derivative from a consensus of partial perspectives is one of the cardinal trademarks of conventionalism. The irony here, as demonstrated by Klee, is that positivism is also conventionalist in its epistemological foundations and orientation. Hill Collins' epistemological distance from positivism is not as far as it initially seems to be. There are epistemological links emanating from the common source of conventionalism. Furthermore, since Hill Collins upholds the epistemological premise of social constructivism then she is invariably caught in the conventionalist web. The differences between Hill Collins' phenomenology of social constructivism and positivism centers on distinctions within empiricism, thus they share in the same epistemological starting point.

In his criticism of positivism, Lenin highlighted its conventionalist character. With positivism, rather than the materialist notion of knowledge as a reflection of material reality, we are left with convenient fictions. The reader should notice the strong similarity that Hill Collins' aforementioned citation shares with Lenin's characterization of positivism. He cogently argues,

Henri Poincaré is an eminent physicist but a poor philosopher, whose errors Yushkevitch, of course, declared to be the last word on positivism, so "recent" indeed, that it even required a new "ism" viz., empirio-symbolism. For Poincaré...the laws of physics are symbols, conventions, which man creates for the sake of "*convenience*." "The only true objective reality is the internal harmony of the world." By "objective" Poincaré means that which is generally regarded as valid, that which is accepted by the majority of men, or by all. ...And as regards "harmony" he categorically declares in answer to the question whether it exists *outside of us*—"undoubtedly no."<sup>10</sup>

Given Hill Collins' critique of positivism, Euro-masculinist epistemology, gender/racial oppression, and other forms of domination, it is perplexing that she views Marxism as an untenable epistemological alternative. Hill Collins claims that Western socio-political thought displays two major tendencies, positivism and relativism. Positivism seeks absolute truth based on "objective, unbiased tools of science to measure these truths."<sup>11</sup>

Quite paradoxically Hill Collins dismisses Marxist epistemology on the grounds that it, as a foundation for earlier forms of "standpoint theory," fosters a reverse form of positivism. Hill Collins misunderstands that under her definition of positivism, Marxism cannot be both standpoint theory, which rejects absolute truth and objectivity, and a reverse form of positivism. This putative reverse form of positivism contained in Marxism, Hill Collins informs us, is the result of assuming the oppressed have a better insight into truth and the presumption there is "one 'true' interpretation of reality." This, of course, is an openly crude distortion and vulgar treatment of Marxist epistemology and its relationship to positivism.<sup>12</sup>

Marxism-Leninism starts from the standpoint of

materialism, viz. there is an objective reality independent of our consciousness of it. To know the objective features and laws of motion governing this objective (material) reality requires not mere interpretations of it but objective knowledge gained by scientific inquiry. Positivism and Hill Collins' social constructivism, sequentially, reject the notion of knowing objective reality for various forms of conventionalism. Hence, we have the import of the Lenin citation.<sup>13</sup>

However, there is a larger problem of significant political insinuation with Hill Collins' "dialogical" notion of Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Despite Hill Collins' disavowal of relativism, it is most apparent that any critique of domination and oppression facilitated by means of the concept of reciprocal truth becomes problematic. The necessity for dialogue emanates from, what I view as, an implausible presumption. Namely, that in order to gain a greater perspective on truth an account must be taken of all partial truths, including those which attach to the interests of the oppressor.

Moreover, on closer scrutiny we find embedded in the implausibility of Hill Collins' presupposition are grave political implications. Since this dialogue mandates the recognition of the oppressors' truths (on the part of the oppressed) then any political outcome will be far from an innocent exchange of "situated knowledges." Philosophically we have no more than a subjectivist form of relativism. In the tradition of Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogism," Hill Collins posits each subject has a partial truth that must be respected and recognized by all concerned. Therefore, it follows the oppressed ought to acknowledge their oppression is not the whole (objective) truth. Perhaps in the tradition of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Hill Collins implicitly desires to make known to us that the oppressor (as much as the oppressed) is the real victim in an oppressive relationship. If this is not her implicit intention, it is certainly the explicit implication contained in her conception of truth.

This subjective relativism, founded of a part/whole dichotomy, simply reduces to the proposition that "Just as the oppressor does not have an objective claim to the truth, so it is for the oppressed." The truth of oppression intrinsic to slavery, for example, cannot be gathered only from the slave's standpoint. Hill Collins' rejection of the slave narrative's propriety to *objective* truth is constituted in her aim to establish truth on the grounds of *inter-subjectivity*. Consequently, we discover a significant philosophical implication of political import, when *objectivity* gives way to *inter-subjectivity* then *subjective relativism* reigns supreme.

On this account the slave narrative must be adjoined with the slave master's in order to acquire the greater truth. The slave master brings partial truth, which complements the perspective of the slave narrative. Hence, the slave must be just as open to the master's partial truths as the slave master must be of the slave's. For this is an entrenched imperative inextricably tied to Hill Collins' notion of truth resulting from consensus.<sup>14</sup>

Such an epistemological position ushers in nothing less than a politics of compromise. Ostensibly the suggestion is a most debilitating political proposal, viz., pursue the politics of recognition. Moreover, the upshot of this epistemology of dialogical truth is not a politics of liberation but an ethics of reconciliation between the oppressed and the oppressors. In ideological terms, we are left with inept liberal moralism serving as a surrogate for a political struggle guided by revolutionary theory and scientific epistemology.

There is another aspect to Hill Collins' liberalism, which Joy James brings to our attention. Noting the generic mode of Hill Collins' depiction of Black women's thought and practice wherein all political and ideological tendencies among Black women are seen as radical or revolutionary, James posits,

Unfortunately, *Black Feminist Thought* also elides black female radicals. Reconstructing historical radicals as liberals, it deradicalizes militant women to generalize movement women activists as wedded to liberal politics. Collins redefines most forms of black women's anti-racist work, including social work, as "radicalism." In so doing, her text serves as a primary example for the erasure of the black women radical... Collins implicitly defines as revolutionary all black women who survive and thereby resist oppression, even if they do not engage in public activism or confrontation with the state.<sup>15</sup>

Liberation, as opposed to liberalism, requires the complete eradication of oppression, the full recognition of the truth contained in the struggle of the oppressed, exploited, and wretched of the earth. A struggle waged over and against the material conditions and ideological justifications of oppression and exploitation. My critique offers a sharp distinction between the social constructivism and Marxism-Leninism as a scientific epistemology. Unfortunately, not all considered as Marxist-Leninist philosophers among African American thinkers, have, in turn, made a sharp distinction between social constructivism and Marxism-Leninism as scientific epistemology.

Angela Davis presents an important review of Hill Collins' text in the journal *Teaching Philosophy*. Davis, who is a Marxist-Leninist philosopher (or at least to my knowledge was at the time of her review of Hill Collins' book), offers a strikingly different analysis than my critique. Davis' response to Hill Collins, in my estimation, is most congratulatory and views Hill Collins' book as "path-breaking." One of the strong points of the book for Davis is the "syncretic construction of a Black feminist intellectual tradition, which draws upon multiple theoretical sources—sociological, gender and race theory for example—methodologically, centralizes Black women's historical and contemporary experiences."<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, Davis brings to our attention Hill Collins' philosophical contributions by way of epistemology. An epistemology I have demonstrated to be locked in the abyss of subjective idealism, relativism, and dialogical conceptions of truth. Nevertheless, Davis accents,

Collins' meditations on epistemology will be especially insightful to philosophy students who are grappling with contemporary debates about multiculturalism at a time when Eurocentric and masculinist theories of knowledge are the targets of multiple challenges. Collins' extensively researched and thoughtfully formulated study demonstrates that such challenges, regarded by some as simply nihilistic, can yield exciting new approaches to the study of knowledge production.<sup>17</sup>

Davis continues her praise of Collins' work in epistemology by pointing to the experiential grounds of Hill Collins' epistemology. Collins asserts that the production of knowledge must be comprehended from the standpoint of the experience of the knower. Davis holds that this view is a counter to positivism and its "idealist notion" of abstracting knowledge from the lived experiences of Black women. Moreover, Davis gives credence to Collins' attempt at joining "Afrocentric and Feminist analyses in order to construct what she calls an Afrocentric feminist epistemology."<sup>18</sup>

My critical response to Davis' review centers on her evaluation of Hill Collins' conception of epistemology. Davis nowhere acknowledges as problematic Hill Collins' ambiguity with regard to positivism. Nor do we find a critique of Hill Collins' blatant idealism adjoined to her social constructivism.

Davis completely leaves out of the picture the epistemological and ontological connection holding Hill Collins' social constructivism to positivism. Subsequently, Davis views Hill Collins as an opponent of positivism and in granting such a strong endorsement offers no qualifications or caveats.

As I earlier pointed out, positivism is in fact a form of empiricism. Its idealism does not derive from ignoring experience; instead, it is due to abstracting experience from any materialist context or foundation. The chief error in positivism is consequently not, as Davis argues, the "idealist notion" of abstracting knowledge from the lived experiences of Black women. Davis' evaluation leaves Hill Collins' phenomenological form of empiricism as pristine, and beyond the pale of idealism.

If it is the case that Davis holds a Marxist, dialectical materialist, philosophical perspective, then I find Davis' laudatory reaction to Hill Collins' "syncretic" method as most contradictory and perplexing. Firstly, it forces a mixture of disparate and contrary elements into an organic whole. This, of course, is not the way of a dialectical materialist methodology; instead, what we have is eclecticism; a collage of disjointed philosophical theses and conjectures. In explicitly commending Hill Collins for the use of such an eclectic method, Davis abandons the dialectical method of Marxist philosophy.

Dialectics as a Marxist concept posits that all unity must entail an intrinsic connection (internal relation) between variously (apparently) disparate parts. This dialectical opposition, which is the outcome of a relation of difference, wherein contradictions appear, cannot be equated with contradictions between mutually exclusive opposites. As with the dialogical conception of truth, Hill Collins seeks a synthesis of opposites irrespective of relations of mutual exclusion. Secondly, the distinction between epistemology and sociology of knowledge is broached when one assumes that experience alone is the grounds for establishing the truth of knowledge.

The fact that one may have certain experiences does not in itself lend to the grasp of the objective character and features of a given phenomenon. An epistemology must be objectively grounded so that experiences are weighted against material conditions, which under capitalist conditions are often masked by ideological illusions and reified social relations of production. Standpoint epistemology ignores this fact since it fails to go outside the gates of phenomenal appearances.

I am sure that Angela Davis at one point, at least, understood why Marx in *Capital* made it transparent that all science would be superfluous if all appearances and essences directly coincided. The very need for a dialectical understanding comes precisely in the fact that essence necessarily appears in a given form. This relationship of essence and appearance requires the function of a materialist epistemology in conjunction with social practice, and revolutionary theory to guide practical action. This is why, as Marx notes, empiricism is unable to provide a critique of capitalism and, at best, points to various types of reformism. Historically, we observe that reformist formulations leave intact the objective material relations of capitalism.

Yet Davis embraces the kind of agency, which Hill Collins brings to the fore, wherein the emphasis is on "both/and" instead of "either/or." Since this "both/and" perspective is rooted in syncretism and eclecticism, Afrocentricism and feminism are unproblematically adjoined. Even if we grant that agency reduces to the production of knowledge, albeit putative "subjugated knowledge," nonetheless, the producers of this knowledge are without a materialist epistemology. More precisely, it would lack any form of epistemology since the sociology of knowledge given our prior remarks on fideism (perhaps a better phrase is the "sociology of social

consciousness”) substitutes for epistemology.

Indeed, because Hill Collins disregards and dismisses Marxism and its focus on class analysis, the generic category of “Black women intellectuals” irrespective of class perspective (ideology), assumes “centrality” “in producing Black feminist thought.” Davis, in her review, stands in full agreement with this claim about Black women intellectuals, especially those located in the academy, as the creators of Black feminist thought and subsequently endorses Hill Collins’ non-proletarian class approach to intellectual activity. In most respects, Hill Collins’ claim amounts to a gendered version of Harold Cruse’s anti-Marxist thesis of Black intellectuals as the catalysts for historical development. Joy James argues,

Black women expressed radical commitments in spite of, not because of their teaching positions. Most institutional educators, black women included, likely avoid activism that jeopardizes their teaching careers. This suggests that teaching, in academia or elsewhere, may be a deradicalizing political site, irrespective of Collins’ claims for its intrinsic progressivism.<sup>19</sup>

Of significance to our critique of Davis is her affirmation of this anti-Marxist, non-proletarian class approach to Black feminist thought. This endorsement and affirmation is a clear indicator of the significant divide between Davis’ earlier essay on white feminism and her later perspectives on Hill Collins’ Black feminism. The former essay is one which is consciously located within the framework of Marxist critique, while the latter essay abandons this ideological and philosophical framework.

The philosophical consequences are clear and plain. What we get from Hill Collins is something more in line with Karl Mannheim’s idealism than with Karl Marx’s materialism. What is most disturbing is that Davis, throughout her review, remains ever so silent on this fundamental philosophical point, the line of demarcation separating dialectical materialism from the sociology of knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

Davis’ critical Marxist assessment in her first essay of very similar issues, with respect to white feminism, is now pushed aside in her discussion on Hill Collins’ Black feminist thought. Although we can only speculate about why she makes such a qualitative shift, the fact remains; Davis makes a philosophical transition decisively away from Marxism-Leninism.<sup>21</sup>

Davis’ review, by not taking into account the very important core of Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, and class struggle, falls prey to subjective idealism, a point which her critics, such as in the case of Curry and Green, are more than willing to attach to Davis’ philosophical perspective. We will later see that in many ways, Davis’ review of Hill Collins confirms much of the Curry/Green analysis regarding the postmodernist/pragmatist (idealist) elements enfolding Davis’ philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

Davis’ corpus is marked by inconsistencies and contradictions thus calling into question her locus as a Marxist-Leninist philosopher. Does Davis still (today?) maintain her earlier philosophical position? Can we conclude Davis is presently committed to Marxist-Leninist philosophy? If the review of Hill Collins is our indicator then the answer must be an unequivocal no.

Indeed, confusion persists about Davis’ locus within the Marxist-Leninist philosophical tradition. This lack of clarity is amplified when we observe that Davis’ first essay, initially written in 1977, has been republished in anthologies as recent as 1998 and 2000. Joy James is the editor of the first text, *The Angela Davis Reader*, and co-editor with T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting of the second one, *The Black Feminist Reader*. Are we just reading an old position or is Davis unaware of her inconsistencies with regard to these two essays? Unfortunately,

there are no editorial remarks in the republished works to guide the reader in answering questions about Davis’ consistency as a Marxist-Leninist philosopher.<sup>23</sup>

The locus of Davis as Marxist philosopher, unlike her place as a Marxist activist, has been debated among philosophers. Anatol Anton and Leonard Harris have debated the merits of Davis’ contributions qua philosophical argumentation. Anton argues that Davis’ work lacks sustained theoretical content, while Harris’ response to this criticism is to amplify the concrete activist character of her work as a needed way of doing philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

### Green and Curry’s “Notorious” Assessment of Davis as Philosopher

Green and Curry in their rather sympathetic article, “Notorious Philosopher: The Transformative Life and Work of Angela Davis,” argue Davis’ philosophical contributions have essentially been in the areas of Critical Theory, Black Liberation Theory, and Feminist Theory. Noticeably absent in their assessment is any mention of Davis’ contributions to Marxist-Leninist philosophy or her locus as philosopher within Marxism-Leninism.

On close review of Green and Curry’s article, we discover the typology they offer for Davis’ philosophical stance is eclectic and tendered from a postmodernist/pragmatist perspective. On the one hand, she is viewed as having “unfailing inclusiveness” in as much as she rejects “homogenizing universalisms and hierarchical dualism that downplay the significance of the diverse elements of the complex of gender/race/class...”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, they find,

[T]heoretical problems that at times blemished Davis’ work...including her lack of attention to international differences; her loyal refusal to criticize...serious problems within quasi-Marxist socialisms in Cuba and the USSR; her lack of a post-Soviet conception of socialism...and some lingering essentialism, though within a broader set of social and analytical categories than those she received from the complex of historical traditions she inherited.<sup>26</sup>

To better grasp the import of Curry and Green’s analysis, I want to unpack and decode the meaning of the following concepts: “unfailing inclusiveness,” “homogenizing universalisms,” and “hierarchical dualism.” “Unfailing inclusiveness” as it relates to the dialectic of race, class, and gender means to accent the multi-factored character of the struggle for transforming bourgeois society. What is instructive is the notion that each factor has the same analytical importance and political weight within a dialectical relationship.

When “homogenizing universalisms” is contrasted to “unfailing inclusiveness” what is philosophically in contention is a conception of totality. If totality is conceived in terms of “homogenizing universalism,” then, for them, what transpires is the quantitative transformation of the qualitative dimension attached to this dialectic of factors. Concretely, “homogenizing universalism” reduces the factors of race and gender to the class categories of proletariat and bourgeoisie. On this account, class analysis, as the central conceptual framework, is de facto the abandonment of the struggle against racism and sexism via class reductionism.

The postmodernist/pragmatist response to Marxism as meta-narrative necessarily employs a pejorative connotation to the primacy of class struggle and materialism. The idea of “hierarchical dualism” is again a code word for not following a factor theory of pluralism. The Marxist-Leninist conceptual framework of social being/social consciousness, materialism/idealism, base/superstructure, productive forces/relations of

production, and essence/appearance are instances of so-called “hierarchical dualism.” The fact that these authors find Davis acceptable to their postmodernist/pragmatist presuppositions becomes an insightful hint for any elaboration of Davis’ conception of Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

Notice the alleged theoretical problems are all connected with the ostensible Marxist-Leninist elements in Davis’ worldview. Her support of the former Soviet Union and present Socialist Cuba, they view as a weakness emanating from a putative “lingering essentialism.” What do they mean by “lingering essentialism”? The postmodernist impetus for criticizing essentialism derives from the supposition that essence, enduring substance, or an axiological notion of intrinsic value is antithetical to relativism.

Postmodernism in relativizing all phenomena incorrectly asserts that entities are bereft of essence. Without a notion of essence, intrinsic value, or substance that endures through the contingencies of change, relativism fosters a protean sort of identity. If there are no essences then phenomenalism adjoins with relativism as a species of subjectivism. Given the context of Curry and Green’s criticism, one can only conclude that this allegation is a not-so-transparent reference to Davis’ Marxist-Leninism and political endorsement of the world Communist movement.

Whatever the pitfalls of the former Soviet Union, it represented the first Socialist (proletarian) revolution in the world. Cuba no doubt represents a very significant outpost of proletarian revolution. Curry and Green in their obvious bias against Marxism have not faced the fact that some of Davis’ ideological, philosophical, and theoretical development (not only regarding the complexities of race, class, and gender but also anti-imperialism, socialism, and proletarian internationalism) was the direct result of her experiences and philosophical work as a member of the Communist Party USA along with her visits to the Soviet Union and Cuba.

For example, Davis taught philosophy in Cuba and came to understand how the eradication of class exploitation is the material basis for the destruction of racism and sexism as well as socialism as the material expression of anti-imperialism. Since Curry and Green view all three factors as equivalent in their material force, they are disinclined to accept a materialist analysis of racism and capitalism. In a comparative analysis of Davis and Habermas’ philosophies, Green and Curry conclude,

Likewise, both Davis and Habermas assume and in their differing ways argue for post-Freudian psychologies in which they treat political actors as relational social beings, rather than treating them as or seeking to help them become self-sufficient autonomous individuals. An important difference, however is that Davis’s political actors are also richly historical beings, sharing their standpoint, desires, and self-conceptions by particular patterns of power relations and events that must be taken fully into account and analyzing and transforming their current situations towards a preferable though only broadly specifiable future. In these respects, Davis’s view seems closer to the pragmatism of William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, whereas Habermas’s ideal theoretical approach seems closer to that of John Rawls. Like Davis, James justified his methodology and his epistemology by the lessons of experience and what “works.”<sup>27</sup>

Their additional remarks in aligning Davis with the pragmatic tradition of James, Mead, and Dewey is a gross disservice rather

than a compliment, that is, if we hold that Davis is a proponent of the dialectical materialist (Marxist-Leninist) conception of practice. By linking Davis to pragmatism, they offer, albeit through the backdoor, a damning indictment to Davis’ practical and theoretical work. The Marxist theory of practice is grounded in an ontological and epistemological materialist foundation. Truth in the Marxist tradition is objective and hence compels a correspondence theory of truth. Pragmatism, in contrast, is a conventionalist approach to truth and thereby subjectivist and politically opportunist in character. At the very least, one can say Davis is far from an opportunist.

These critical remarks on the Curry/Green evaluation notwithstanding, it is surprising Davis (as a Marxist philosopher?) does not offer any critical analysis of Hill Collins’ Afrocentric thought. Afrocentrism as a species of petty bourgeois Black Nationalism is a major danger and corrupting force in Black Studies and the African American liberation movement today.<sup>28</sup>

From the standpoint of a Marxist analysis, ethnocentrism is flawed because it centers reality on a given ethnic group. Such centering, by inference, devalues all other groups by virtue of their non-membership in the central group. The danger in Eurocentrism is its centrist casting. Eurocentrism and Afrocentricism are paradigmatically species of ethnocentrism. Following this line of reasoning Afrocentrism is a commitment to narrowly attentive identity politics.

As earlier noted, Joy James is editor and co-editor of the specified texts, which republished Davis’ first essay; however, she provides no editorial remarks indicating the lack of consistency in Davis’ corpus in the *Davis Reader*. Surprisingly, James does not include in the *Davis Reader* the review on Hill Collins’ work and this despite her different take on it from Davis’ commentary. Such an inclusion, I think, would have shed more light on the charge of philosophical inconsistency.

James does offer critical remarks on Davis, in another text, published in the year between the aforementioned edited texts, which seem to imply Davis is no longer, if she ever was, a revolutionary. James contends, “The high expectations that black Americans displayed toward Davis as a political leader upon her acquittal surpassed the twenty-eight-year old’s training and experience.”<sup>29</sup>

Then, when James refers to Davis in more contemporary terms, she adds an even stronger criticism. Casting doubt about Davis’ locus as a revolutionary, here James provides a markedly different view than we find with Green and Curry. James boldly contends,

As an iconoclastic academic and radical intellectual, Davis represents the “revolutionary” for left liberals and progressiveness and not necessarily for radical activists or impoverished or working-class peoples. Her symbolic representation and appeal are both transnational and transracial. Davis’s public persona is partly fueled by her hybrid nature as a member of the elite Talented Tenth; this stature of bourgeois respectability was cemented by her 1990 appointment as full professor at the University of California and her 1991 expulsion from the Communist Party USA.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, James’ own analysis emanates from an amorphous elite/grassroots framework or a kind of C. Wright Mills’ notion of populism contra elites that elide concrete specification of determinate class and ideological positioning. More simply put, James’ own analysis falls within the realm of the left/liberal progressivism posture, which she alludes to in her citation. So we remain unclear, given James’ contribution to research on Davis, as to whether Davis is or is not a Marxist-



Leninist philosopher at any given moment in her intellectual development or political practice. We can only surmise, granting that James' assertion is without thorough examination and concrete analysis of Davis' philosophical/ideological position and corpus, that James' claim of Davis' "bourgeois respectability" signals Davis' departure from Marxism-Leninism. What we can concretely and unequivocally conclude is that Angela Davis' review of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* is an open departure from Marxist philosophy. The task still remains in locating Angela Davis' body of works within the spectrum of Marxism-Leninism philosophical tradition. Of course, space does not permit such an undertaking at this time.

#### Acknowledgment

I want to thank Dr. Stephen Ferguson of North Carolina A & T University and Mr. Andrew Woodson of Michigan State University for their editorial and substantive comments on this essay. Their contributions have greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

#### Endnotes

1. John H. McClendon. "Dr. Holmes, The Rebel Philosopher." *Freedomways* 22:1 (Spring 1982). John H. McClendon. "Eugene C. Holmes: A Commentary on a Black Marxist Philosopher." In *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1983).
2. See Angela Davis, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998).
3. Angela Davis. "Review of Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*." *Teaching Philosophy* 16:4 (December 1993): 351.
4. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 207. For an example of such a conflation, see James E. Turner, "Africana Studies and Epistemology: A Discourse in the Sociology of Knowledge," in *The Next Decade: Theoretical and Research Issues in Africana Studies*, ed. James E. Turner (Ithaca, New York: Africana Studies and Research Center – Cornell University, 1984), v-xxv. Beverly Gordon, "African-American Cultural Knowledge and Liberatory Education: Dilemmas, Problems, and Potentials in a Post-Modern American Society" in *Too Much Schooling, too Little Education*, ed. Mwalimu J. Shujaa (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994), 57-78. In African American intellectual culture, the forerunner to this conflation is the African American philosopher, William T. Fontaine. See William T. Fontaine, "Social Determination in the Writing of Negro Scholars," *American Journal of Sociology* 49 (January 1944): 302-13.
5. Angela Y. Davis. "Unfinished Lectures on Liberation." In *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 58. On Douglass as a precursor to Black liberation theology read Reginald Davis, *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005).
6. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 205.
7. See Robert Klee, *Introduction to The Philosophy of Science: Cutting Nature At Its Seams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.
8. See Robert Klee, *Introduction to The Philosophy of Science*, 28. See especially his chapter 2, "The Positivist Model of Scientific Theories."
9. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist*, p. 236.
10. Lenin, *Materialism*, p. 165.
11. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist*, p. 235.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Hill Collins does not reference Hegel's *Phenomenology* nor

for that matter Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogism" as a source for her ideas. My comments rest on the commonalities. For treatment of Bakhtin see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Hegel's *Phenomenology* has had considerable influence on African American intellectual history and the discussion of slavery. See Cynthia Willett, *Maternal Ethics and other Slave Moralities* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For a book review of Willett's text and a brief discussion of the impact of Hegel on African American intellectuals see John H. McClendon's review in *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 21:2 (Summer/Fall 1996). Among those cited include William Ferris, Charles Leander Hill, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eugene C. Holmes, and C. L. R. James. For a more substantial treatment of C.L.R. James with reference to Hegel, read John H. McClendon III, *C.L.R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005). For an examination on the impact of Hegel's *Phenomenology* on the West Indian psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, see Ato Sekyi-Out, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Also consult chapter 2 of *Marxism, Philosophy and the Africana World*.

15. Joy James. *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 94-5.
16. Angela Davis. "Review of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and Politics of Empowerment*." *Teaching Philosophy* 16:4 (December 1993): 351.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
19. Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, p. 142.
20. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge perspective is best exemplified in African American intellectual culture with William T. Fontaine, "An Interpretation of Contemporary Negro Thought from the Standpoint of the Sociology of Knowledge," *Journal of Negro History* 25:1 (January 1970). For a dialectical materialist critique of the sociology of knowledge vis-à-vis African American sociologist Robert Staples, see John H. McClendon, "Black Subjectivity: Another Name for Black Sociology" in *Freedomways* (Spring 1980).
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22. Judith Mary Green and Blanch Radford Curry. "Notorious Philosopher: The Transformative Life and Work of Angela Davis." In *Hypathia Daughters: Fifteen Hundred Years of Women Philosophers*, ed. Linda Lopez McAllister (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 301-25.
23. This essay first appeared in Howard Parsons and John Somerville, eds. *Marxism, Revolution and Peace* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1977). It has been republished in Joy James, ed., *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998) and Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, eds. *The Black Feminist Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).
24. On the Harris/Anton debate, see Leonard Harris, "More About Angela Davis: Response to Anatol Anton," *Radical Philosophy Association Newsletter* 21 (Winter 1990).
25. Judith Mary Green and Blanch Radford Curry, "Notorious Philosopher," p. 301.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302.
27. In this respect, Green and Curry replicate a similar pragmatist analysis, which we can find with Cornel West's treatment of Du Bois in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. Judith Mary Green and Blanch Radford Curry, "Notorious Philosopher," p. 313. Also consult Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), see especially pp. 138-50.
28. It is instructive to compare Davis' silence about Hill Collins' Afrocentricity and the article, Angela Y. Davis, "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and Nineties" in *The Angela Y. Davis*

*Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 289-93. For a critical examination of Afrocentricity, read John H. McClendon, "The Afrocentric Project: The Quest for Particularity and the Negation of Objectivity," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 18:1 (January 1995).

29. Joy James. *Shadow Boxing: Representation of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 107.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

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## Monopoly Intellectualism

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It was the aspiration of many observing the influence of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and the emergence of African American Studies in the intellectual arena that the latter would find permanent intellectual roots and flourish in institutions of higher education all over the United States. But this premise was based on a lack of understanding that the foundation of the dominant intellectual tradition, to some extent, was based on the negation of other traditions and that the conceptual framework of the philosophical self-understanding of the history and content of the discourse of many elements or strands of Western thought was built on the falsification of the cultural development of peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Ideas are born in the context of cultural and political movements and, as a consequence, are never neutral, and their employment and sustenance are always within the context of power relations.

Any cursory reference to the history of ideas—Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian, Romans—shows that Europeans' understanding of themselves in relation to other nations, peoples, and cultures finds expression in their philosophical ideas in terms of preserving and exporting a particular vision of themselves and the world. A primary mission of the institutions of nation states or empires is maintenance of a certain kind of social order and the preservation of that order as one of uniqueness and exceptionality. The promotion of cosmopolitanism is always related to particularism—Roman citizen, French, Dutch, Spanish, English, etc. The rise of nationalism has been merely a sibling rivalry within the family that promotes intellectual monopoly as evident in the enlightenment—whether German, French, or English or the revolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century and twentieth century, that is, Darwinian, Marxian, Freudian. All these ideas, for the most part, have been used to promote a view of the world that solidifies a monopoly within educational institutions at all levels of social organization. To be a Roman citizen is to be institutionalized within a certain view of the world irrespective of ethnicity—the same with respect to being an English, or French, or American citizen. There has always been ethnic self-assertion over a period of history—sometimes ruthlessly suppressed or treated with benign neglect depending on the perceived threat or lack thereof by rulers of state. For the most part, many within these sub-groups proudly bear the insignia of their overlords as some of us proudly recite under British imperialism, "Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves"; "the sun never sets on the British Empire."

In the American experience, this self-assertion found fertile ground and international appeal in the Garvey Movement—One Race, One God, One Destiny—and fired the imagination of a people, to such an extent, that in spite of retreats and even reversals continues its forward march. The aspirations of the sixties and seventies movement and its attendant pockets of success in a few academic institutions today is part of that self-assertion of the early twentieth century as well as fields of

gender and ethnic studies. This quest for cultural sovereignty primarily within the context of the black experience has been merely a side show as academic institutions continue to exercise intellectual monopoly in the service of empire.

Monopoly is exercised in a number of ways including the most obvious of canonical text representations. Along with obvious perennial inclusions of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Hegel, Marx, and others, there seems to be an arbitrariness to this selection of inclusion and the general survey of typical undergraduate introductory courses in the discipline of philosophy is quite instructive for that matter. The concept of the market place of ideas as an open forum which generates certain kinds of egalitarian free exchange is no different from the myth of free trade in the economic sphere. Academic institutions, for the most part, irrespective of lofty mission statements, are there to preserve a world-view and work towards the maintenance of a certain social order while at the same time strive to give the appearance of free exchange and the sovereignty of intellectual freedom. The pretense of cultural and intellectual diversity is readily exposed when the content of curricula is examined. Officialdom continues to make selections of the tried and the true representative figures over the centuries and, for the most part, works of those outside the official canons are regulated to special topics for consideration.

As we face continuous economic contraction, there will be reversals of even the minute gains that have been made in terms of other voices being heard in academia. Consequently, the battle over ideas is not merely an intellectual one, but economic, cultural, social, and political. The free flow of ideas is exercised within the constraint of decision making within the institution as to who will be hired, who will be fired, and many times how the general public will respond to these ideas. In many instances, it is not a matter of right or left but how to maintain social order within and without the academic community, especially since knowledge transference has become a commodity like any other. Many in the movement—sixties and seventies—understood clearly that education as a revolutionary weapon for cultural transformation would have to be cultivated outside of the monopoly of the major intellectual institutions and many set out to accomplish this task at the community level.<sup>1</sup>

We are at the threshold of another revolution that might just put a dent in the intellectual monopoly by opening up a new vista on the information super highway. Out of the confusion of the Internet chatter many more voices will be heard. Until such time (if that is at all possible given the ruling capitalist class to harness all technological advance within its control), there is hardly any possibility that there will be any real opening to intellectual diversity in higher education especially as stated already that most of the ideas that are popularized are not culture neutral but are for the most part related to who benefits and under what conditions. Case in point is the scramble for research grants and what topics are considered worthy for these endeavors.

Intellectual monopoly is all part and parcel of socio-economic structures. Hence, when different ideas intrude on the revered canons and canonical figures this is perceived by many within and without academia as an assault on *the* established way of life, namely, social and economic structures. It is naive to believe that one should get a hearing merely because of the persuasiveness of one's ideas especially when it goes against the grain of the established order. Intellectual monopoly, in its present form, will experience change when the legitimacy of the present social arrangement is called into question and new ones are formed. Many institutions that profess democratic ideas—free flow of information—stand

scandalized by their suppression of dissenting voices and leaders within the institutions are always engaged in delicate and sometimes dangerous balancing acts between maintaining social order and promoting the free flow of ideas, always relating decision making to economic forces and the preservation of institutional traditions.

In this context, intellectual traditions are conceived on a sliding scale of importance and relevance to those who are at the commanding heights of preserving what they conceive to be central to their conception of excellence and maintenance of social order. The belief by many that politics should not be a part of the screening and hiring of academic practitioners is a completely unrealistic idea of the hidden and many times quite overt *raison d'être* of these institutions. As currently structured, it is most difficult to conceive egalitarianism in the market place of ideas in institutions of education.

The question is: What would a democratized institution look like both in terms of polity and curricula in what some perceive as multicultural society? Whose narratives are woven in the history of philosophy, psychology, mathematics, religion, etc.? What is the relationship of production in these departments? These are old questions that have been rehashed continuously. Must the ruling ideas always be of the ruling class? As one can see these are not merely academic questions, but the response might very well determine who shall eat and who shall not eat not only among academic practitioners, but whose work will determine national and international policies that affect billions of people in areas like health, education, environment, or food distribution. Irrespective of the numerous claims about the purity of reason, many of us can see clearly the embeddedness of culture, tradition, and even personal idiosyncrasy in the voices that are being heard. Many of us as human beings like to experience some element of cultural affinity or connection to the information that we appropriate. As a result, democratization at all levels—content, curricula, personnel—is considered an intellectual birthright.

What we are saying is that intellectual monopoly is at the very foundation of the state apparatus including economic and political structures, and academic institutions are mere conduits fulfilling the function of the state and for the most part students are consumers of state-controlled commodities. The history of academia is replete with incidents of self-censure when faced with unpopular ideas that meet the disapproval of the watchful eyes of the state. Many arguments that have been developed for keeping politics out of academia are quite interesting but based on false premises since a primary function of these institutions is to find justification for political and social systems and to train leaders for the maintenance of the political order. Consequently, in the final analysis, it is a question of whose ideas are worthy of investigation, appropriation, and dissemination and whose are merely of “academic” interest to present with perfunctory remarks and ultimately rejected.

Our tepid attempt to hold academia accountable might be the result of the failure of nerve to confront the state apparatus as a whole. What is the role of academic institutions vis-à-vis the state apart from perfunctory mission statements? Should these institutions be in the business of cultivating civic virtues as ends in themselves or should these virtues be a way of enhancing policies or goals of the state? We are always confronted with the perennial question from Plato to the present as to what is the individual relationship to the state and under what condition virtue ethics should be practiced as well as when state power should be respected or confronted.

The Black Arts Movement was self-consciously political and utilized cultural forms as a weapon against oppression. Exponents fully recognized that their political and social philosophy and

intellectual mission would not be accommodated in academia since, for the most part, many of these ideas were in direct confrontation with state power. Hence, these modes of thinking would never get credentialized in “respected” institutions. Because of the ferocity of the critique of cultural imperialism and intellectual militancy of this movement, accommodations were made by instituting Black Studies Programs on some campuses, but their legitimacy is always questioned both from an intellectual and policy point of view and the fact that many remain merely programs today irrespective of credentials is a testimony to the enduring influence of the hegemony of cultural intellectual monopoly. One is fully aware of the constant debate of costs and benefits of programs or departments but from an institutional point of view the resistance for autonomy of these programs is without question.

Whether one is engaged in quantitative research or engaged in expository rendition of historical themes is immaterial to the resistance received from policy makers and academicians. In the culture of free market, some academic disciplines might just be allowed to die and as the saying goes, “Last hired, first fired.”

The Black Arts Movement was not merely an insurgency phenomenon delivering broadsides to established institutions, but self-consciously exercising the positive affirmation of the black experience. Irrespective of internal contradictions and sometimes outright propagandizing, its lasting effect is quite evident in institutions nationwide, whether Cornell, Harvard, Temple, and San Francisco State. Consequently its pioneering vision and intellectual militancy provide an occasion for celebration forty years later and in spite of reversals, there is a modicum of legitimacy of the study of African and African American experience.

The suspicion and sometimes ridicule by some establishment scholars white and black of the Afrocentric movement is worthy of investigation as to the assumptions and self understanding as to what constitutes appropriate intellectual research in light of the fact of the historical and cultural environment that has given rise to the acceptance of Black Studies in academic institutions. The question of legitimacy and normativity is always related to certain assumptions about what constitutes good academic research and related to questions of value appropriation.

Culture wars are nothing new as is evident to any student of intellectual history whether in ancient Greece amongst realists and idealists, medieval fathers, sixteenth-century reformers, enlightenment rationalists and empiricists, nineteenth-century radicals and iconoclasts. What is new is the self-assertion of a movement representing a tradition that was considered not worthy of any serious intellectual consideration. Since all intellectual traditions are merely cultural self understandings, to affirm a tradition that has been cemented in one’s consciousness as a kind of radical otherness that pollutes the body polity involves a deliberate re-examination of one’s understanding of philosophical anthropology.

I submit that doing successful field work in a tradition involves a certain level of appropriation. Therefore, it is not merely a matter of who is doing the research in a particular discipline and in this case, Africana Studies, but also the level of proximity to the discipline, namely, appropriation. On a more practical note, the priority given to many disciplines is also related to the place on the world stage, the land, history, and culture from which these disciplines are derived. Therefore, from time to time, there are certain externalities that push what is worthy of intellectual consideration at different times in intellectual, political, and economic history.

What were these externalities that gave rise to the establishment of Black Studies and the waning of many of

these programs today? Can some of these programs survive without another insurgency? Why have some of these programs not moved from insurgency mode to consolidation? These are not merely academic questions but are related to national policy, institutional polity, managerial skills within departments, economic and political stagnation on the continent of Africa.

There is now an urgent need for a collective reassessment of the disciplines of African and African American Studies from a historical perspective. If we assume that the discipline is worthy of study for its own sake, what approaches should we consider as central to its methodological interpretation, namely, historical, philosophical, psychological, scientific, and how it is related to and different from other disciplines known as ethnic studies? What are the possibilities of cooperating with other disciplines, such as Chicano Studies, Women's Studies, Irish Studies? As the discipline moves towards further consolidation, consideration needs to be given to the whole question of its intellectual identity within academia. Consequently, the debate around program versus department needs to be critically reassessed in the interest of the future of the discipline.

Although there are external factors that contribute to methodological and administrative questions within some programs and the discipline as a whole, the continuous movement towards consolidation should be of permanent importance. In this period of consolidation, not discounting the significance of ancient African civilization one must fully recognize the event par excellence that has shaped the American experience and the emergence of this discipline, namely, the institution of slavery and its aftermath. To continuously revisit the source and reassess its impact on the methodology, content, and assumptions of our current discourse is of paramount importance. African American Studies is eminently situated to explore, investigate, and interrogate our self-understanding of being American. The novelty of this discipline because of its historical roots is the ability to explore the American experience applying the tools of philosophy, psychology, history, literature, etc.

Part of its intellectual richness is indeed this mosaic of multi-disciplinary applications. This intellectual agility should serve it well in the midst of the current climate of retrenchment in many departments in the humanities. In spite of unexpected reversals, there is still much to celebrate these forty years after the intellectual uprising of 1968.

#### Endnotes

1. Harlem Writers Guild, led by John O. Killens. See *Magic to Juyu: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* by Kakamu ya Salaam.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Charles Johnson in Context*

Linda Furgerson Selzer (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009). 306 pp.

#### Reviewed by Kathy Glass

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How do disciplinary concerns inform Charles Johnson's art? Which intellectual and cultural groups provide a social context for understanding Johnson's fiction? These are some of the questions that Linda Furgerson Selzer addresses in *Charles Johnson in Context*. While previous scholars have often mined

his philosophical fiction for evidence of philosophical concepts, Selzer "analyze[s] Johnson's literary production in relation to the critical issues raised by the emergence of three black intellectual and cultural formations in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: black philosophers, black Buddhists, and 'new' black public intellectuals" (2). In so doing, Selzer emphasizes not only the philosophical, spiritual, and intellectual traditions that influenced Johnson's philosophical fiction, but she also underscores in rich detail his engagement with, and important contribution to, American philosophy, Western Buddhism, and black intellectual thought in the U.S.

In the opening chapter of her book, Selzer traces the origins of Johnson's fiction to the difficulties faced by the small community of black scholars who found themselves at odds with their graduate programs in philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s. As Selzer explains, students like Johnson, Cornel West, Lucius Outlaw, and others resisted "dominant Anglo-American approaches that emphasized abstract logic and linguistic analysis at the expense of ethics and moral philosophy" (3). Committed to applying philosophical questions to the lived experiences of African Americans and to issues of social justice, these scholars would go on to engage more practical intellectual approaches such as neo-Marxism, phenomenology, existentialism, and pragmatism. As Selzer argues, Johnson vigorously engages these philosophical ideals in his short story "Aletheia" (1979). In this text, the black professor who is alienated from the urban black community is noticeably aligned with Immanuel Kant, the European philosopher who privileged the disinterested and rational pursuit of knowledge. Abstract Kantianism is opposed in the story by Scheler's phenomenology, which, Selzer argues, acknowledges the role of "affectivity in the apprehension of value" (36). However, the latter approach is problematized too, for the story exposes the potential "danger" that could result from the undisciplined expression of emotion. In her analysis, Selzer effectively illustrates how Johnson uses fiction to both "intervene in the disciplinary constraints of academic philosophy" (47) and also to "infuse the calcified discourse of academic philosophy with phenomenological, narratological, and artistic force" (47-8).

In each of the subsequent sections of her book, Selzer situates and analyzes Johnson's literary production in relation to broader philosophical, intellectual, and/or spiritual traditions. Chapter two explores Johnson's first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974), through the lens of his master's thesis on Wilhelm Reich, Freud, and Marx. In her original analysis, Selzer shows how this allegorical tale draws on the thinking of Marcuse and other intellectuals, simultaneously critiquing selected tenets of classical Marxism—and yet embracing aspects of critical Marxism. Chapter three explores the writings of various black Buddhists, and develops from these texts an historical framework within which to comprehend Johnson's fiction. In the *Oxherding Tale* (1982), for instance, Selzer identifies Johnson's understanding of "the social effects of engaged Buddhism," which would "mature with his increased participation in an emergent form of engaged Western Buddhism" (156). In the fourth chapter, Selzer analyzes Johnson's engagement with and revision of cosmopolitanism in *Middle Passage* (1990); and in the final chapter, she argues that Johnson's *Dreamer* (1998) makes an innovative contribution to contemporary scholarship on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s writings and legacy.

Examining Johnson's literary production across a 24-year period, Selzer concludes that his fiction "develops a particular resolution to the tension between private conversion and civic action that is evident from the first in his fiction" (212). A timely, unique, and generative study of Johnson's literary works, this book is a must read for those seeking to better understand

Johnson's literary works, the traditions that have informed them, and have, in turn, been transformed by his creative contributions.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Everett Green** is the founder of the nationally renowned Philosophy Born of Struggle Conference Series. As such, at the level of praxis, he has made every effort to support African American philosophy as a viable and complex philosophical tradition, having to conceive and organize sessions around pivotal black philosophical figures, cultural philosophical themes involving aesthetics, axiology, the canon, racism, etc. His published works include *Immanuel Kant's Critical Philosophy and the Transcendental Horizon* (University Press of America, 1997) and *Afrocentricity and Western Civilization*, and is the editor of Value Inquiry Book Series, Special Series on African American Philosophy. He teaches philosophy at Rockland Community College. He has had a long career in education and taught at every level from elementary education to the university. He has taught extensively in different philosophical traditions, religion and culture, the history of ideas, African/African American and Caribbean philosophical and religious thought.

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