

PROGRAM: PIONEERS OF AFRICANA PHILOSOPHY

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FRIDAY, March 19, 2021

PANEL 1, 10AM-1PM (all times in EST): What is Africana Philosophy?

Dwight Murph: “Black Consciousness and the Emergence of Black/Africana Philosophy”

This paper will give an account of Black consciousness in the ‘60s and some of the historical background that led to the recognition of Black/Africana philosophy by the American Philosophical Association (APA). I will also discuss the historical formation of the New York/New Jersey Society for the Study of Black/Africana Philosophy and its importance for Black philosophers. My aim is to show how philosophical ideas (i.e., about the lived Black experience) sprang from that era and in turn helped to shape the entire field of philosophy. Philosophy about the Black experience needed a force to move it; in other words, we Black philosophers were and continue to be agents of change.

Howard McGary: “African American Philosophy: A Retrospective”

There have been six decades of work by academic philosophers who have identified as practitioners of African American philosophy. African American philosophy, as I see it, is not defined by the race of the practitioners, but by historical, political, and social circumstances. In my remarks, I shall provide some critical and interpretive comments on this body of work.

Leonard Harris: “What, Then, Is Philosophy Born of Struggle?”

Africana philosophy as a form of philosophy born of struggle (there can be more than one form) requires a normative dimension. It emphasizes the negation of necro-being (life as a living death; anti-Black racism as a form of necro-being) and endorses critically pragmatic reasoning methods, as against reasoning methods as sacrosanct tools for pursuing abstract universal truth. Africana philosophy has many voices and organizations. We must hope that they will continue to foreground social justice issues.

John H. McClendon III: “The Recovery and Reconstruction of Pioneering Conceptions in Africana Philosophy: From the Standpoint of Dialectical Materialism”

Our project on the recovery and reconstruction of African American philosophers/philosophy utilizes the theory and method of dialectical materialism. Specifically, our task becomes one of the dialectical unification of precise empirical (historical) research with corresponding philosophical conceptualizations attendant upon the context and content of African American philosophizing. This raises the question: does philosophical theory assume that the history of philosophy poses perennial questions—such as the mind/body problem—of which we witness changes only in form, while what remains as consistently true is an essential content that lasts over time? Is the historical method a matter of knowing how to demarcate the past from the present via some method of periodization? How does one demarcate the philosophical merit of ideas or issues in philosophy’s history from more general notions concerning intellectual history in the

broader non-philosophical sense of the term—such as the history of ideas? In other words, what are accurately considered philosophical questions, issues, and problems? Finally, do we need the past as the primary yardstick for measuring current levels of philosophical attainment among African American philosophers? If so—if the past is indeed crucially significant—then we can historically (concretely) establish a viable framework for what constitute pioneering ideas in Africana philosophy.

PANEL 2, 2-4PM: Inferiority, Racism, and Justice

Alfred E. Prettyman: “How Do We *See* Each Other?”

My talk will explore this crucial question.

Bernard R. Boxill: “Should African American Philosophers Be More Interested in Corrective Justice than in Distributive Justice?”

Charles Mills has deplored John Rawls’s neglect of corrective justice and suggested that the “really interesting issue” for African American philosophy is corrective justice rather than distributive justice. I try to test the truth of this suggestion by a close examination of John Locke’s account of reparation and punishment, two important parts of corrective justice.

PANEL 3, 4:30-6:30PM: Black Lives, Gender, and the Black Aesthetic

Kathryn Sophia Belle: “Audre Lorde’s Conceptualizations of Care”

I begin with the example of Black women’s creation vocabularies (e.g., Hortense Spillers), and how our theories have been misappropriated and taken out of context (e.g., the Combahee River Collective statement on interlocking identities and identity politics). I then examine examples of similar appropriations and decontextualizations of Audre Lorde’s concept of care across several texts, including: “Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (speaking as care); “Burst of Light” (caring for oneself as political warfare); “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (community, diversity, and interdependence as care); “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (erotic empowerment as care); and “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (poetry and creative expression as care).

Joy James: “‘A Republic, if You Can Keep It’: Captive Maternals Leverage Democracy”

This paper examines the role of Captive Maternals in stabilizing and contesting U.S. democracy. As an ungendered function of caretaking, protest movements, and rebellions for social justice and black liberation, Captive Maternals emerge from the histories of racial enslavement and [contemporary antiblack violence](https://sites.williams.edu/contemporary-antiblack-violence/) (sites.williams.edu). Captive Maternal [political relationships to power and POTUSes](https://blog.apaonline.org/political-relationships-to-power-and-potuses/) (blog.apaonline.org) highlight the instability of U.S. democracy.

Al Mosley: “Funky Music in the Philosophy of the Black Aesthetic: It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got that Swing”

In *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of the Black Aesthetic* (2016), Paul Taylor offers a critique of funky music and identifies what he calls “the flaw in the funk” (p. 168). This paper traces Taylor’s views on music’s emotional significance to Peter Kivy’s cognitivist model” in *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (1990), and contrasts it with Leonard Meyer’s “stimulus model” in *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1961). I argue that the “stimulus model” provides a better model of music’s significance than the “cognitivist model,” especially in the African aesthetic tradition. I conclude that a focus on the product rather than the process of music making limits both Kivy’s and Meyer’s perspective. Similarly, Taylor’s perspective as a listener rather than as a participant prejudices his critique of funky music. And it fails to account for the non-literate appreciation and production of music.

SATURDAY, March 20, 2021

PANEL 4, 10AM-12PM: Black Radical Kantianism, White Supremacy, and Herrenvolk Democracy

Frank M. Kirkland: “Kantian Thoughts, Du Boisian Proposals, and Hegelian Reflections on Contractually Liberal and Contractually Racial Dispositions”

In previous work, Charles Mills reduced Kant’s thought to what he called “Kantianism simpliciter” (KS), which Mills claimed was saturated with anti-black racism and committed to white supremacy in both the moral and political theory. Currently Mills generally supports the normative dimension of Kant’s thought, when placed in dialogue with non-ideal evaluations of racial subjugation, such as W.E.B. Du Bois’s reflections, for the sake of a corrective justice. Mills calls this “Black radical Kantianism” (BRK). It is Mills’s racially sensitive version of revisionist Kantianism, like other versions constructed along non-ideal, but class-based or feminist lines. In short, Mills’s prior aversion to KS’s exculpation of anti-Black racism in a socially contractual liberalism is now his conversion to BRK’s arraignment of it therein. Still, how does Kant’s own account of being in or out of the “civic condition” contribute to Mills’s critique of racial subjugation under BRK? How do Du Bois’s reflections in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) make non-ideal contributions to BRK? In what way are Hegel’s reflections on ethical life able to make an ideal contribution to a critique of racial inequality? Or are they, on the contrary, in line with KS?

Robert Gooding-Williams: “The Moral Psychology of White Supremacy and the Theory of Democratic Despotism”

During the era of the Great War, W.E.B. Du Bois believed that white supremacist habits of mind functioned both domestically and internationally to thwart the democratic aspirations of the earth’s “darker folk,” thus intensifying their vulnerability to political domination and economic exploitation. Accordingly, I divide this paper into two parts. In the first, I analyze Du Bois’s moral psychology of the souls of white folk. In the second, I turn to the larger story he tells relating those souls to industrial capitalism and the “new imperialism.” The substance of that story, I argue, is his analysis of “democratic despotism.”

Derrick Darby: “Herrenvolk Democracy and the Black Demos”

In “Of the Ruling of Men,” W.E.B. Du Bois links problems of injustice in America’s postbellum *Herrenvolk* democracy to the exclusion from democratic rule of Blacks, women, and workers. Racist ideas about Black inferiority, including the assertion of Black ignorance, rationalized this exclusion. Du Bois’s solution is to enfranchise the masses. So if, as Du Bois supposes, participation in democratic rule can eradicate injustice, then racism is an obstacle to justice. How does Du Bois address these racist rationalizations? What are his arguments for enfranchising the Black demos? In this paper I will seek to answer these questions.

PANEL 5, 12:30-2:30PM: African and Afro-Caribbean Philosophy

Souleymane Bachir Diagne: “A Humanism and a Politics of *Ubuntu* and *Nite*”

I consider the two words *ubuntu* in Bantu languages and *nite* in Wolof in the philosophical role they play in the definition of African humanisms. I examine the ethico-political significance of the Bantu word *ubuntu* (for which I adopt the translation “being human together”) in the thought of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, and the Wolof *nite* in the philosophy of Léopold Sédar Senghor, to discuss the humanism they express and the cosmopolitical role they should play against the plague of tribalisms and inequalities.

Mickaella L. Perina: “Afro-Caribbean Philosophy: Poetics, Historicism and the Worlds of Relationality and Resistance in Between”

Can the Afro-Caribbean tradition be regarded as unified by a coherent set of joint broad commitments and, if so, what are these commitments? If Afro-Caribbean philosophy is exemplified by works written in various languages and accounting for both similar and different experiences, how does one think through these philosophical explorations and inquiries? And how does one consider Afro-Caribbean philosophy in relation to other traditions in Caribbean philosophy?

In this paper I will engage critically with Paget Henry’s *Caliban’s Reason* (Routledge 2000), published 21 years ago, recognizing its ground-breaking contributions while exploring perspectives it suggested but perhaps did not fully examine. I will look at some of the theoretical problems identified in the book, namely the “splits, dualities and oppositional constructions that have blocked dialogue and hindered growth” (p. 247) and analyze examples of “latent possibilities for reconciliation between opposing positions and the transformative power of these connections and reconciliations” (p. 249) to uncover appropriate concepts and methods. Taking the Caribbean as the foundational environment in relation to which Afro-Caribbean philosophers, essayists, novelists, poets, etc., have understood themselves, others and the world while offering new ways of being and seeing, I will propose an intra-cultural analysis comparing and juxtaposing texts that are often categorized as either poetically or historically constructed to expose and discuss ideas and approaches and, in doing so, contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on Afro-Caribbean philosophy.

PANEL 6, 3-5PM: Reconstructions I, II—and III?

John P. Pittman: “Du Bois on Race and Reconstruction”

The political polarization of the United States—both precipitating the 2016 election of Donald Trump, and in turn exacerbated by it—has raised questions about the realistic prospects for social reconstruction in the wake of a period of intense racial justice mobilization confronting deep white racial resentment. How can W.E.B. Du Bois’s account of 19th-century postbellum Reconstruction help us in grappling with the pressing related questions confronting us now in 2021?

Paget Henry: “Africana Philosophy and the Possibility of a Third Reconstruction”

Africana philosophy gained academic recognition in the late 1970s as the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement (the “Second Reconstruction”) was peaking. This backlash gained serious political traction with the 1968 election of Richard Nixon on the basis of “the Southern strategy.” Reinforcing this backlash was the turn to policies of neoliberalism with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan. This turn was a response to a combination of factors that led to the collapse of post-1945 liberal/Keynesian economic order. These factors included the collapse of the gold standard, the stagflation of the 1970s, rising Asian competition, the challenge from the Third World embodied in the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and the implementing of policies of affirmative action. The major components of the neoliberal turn included de-industrialization, financialization, mass incarceration, and the replacement of affirmative action with diversity.

The major result of these policies has been a militant march to the far right, which has been marked by a series of major crisis points: the financial meltdown of 2008, wage stagnation, attempts to overturn *Roe v Wade*, the rise of the Tea Party, Trumpism, the death of George Floyd, and the attempted coup by Donald Trump to block the presidency of Joe Biden.

This chain of events suggests that since 1980 the U.S. has been attempting a major transition to a new socio-economic order. Though still not in place, this long transition period has polarized the nation, creating ever deeper divisions within it, and intensifying struggles for power.

This paper will examine some of the possible moral contributions that Africana philosophy can make to understanding the political economy of this difficult transition period. In particular, the moral foundations of a possible Third Reconstruction within the broader framework of a Green New Deal. This, I will argue, is the racial/moral significance of George Floyd’s death and the worldwide protests that it triggered. We need both the moral and economic visions of the previous two Reconstructions to counter the regressions of the neo-Jim Crow era. The paper will draw on the moral ideas of Black political economists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Arthur Lewis, Clive Thomas, and William Darity to speak to the challenges of this 40-year transition period in the history of American political economy.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS, 5:30-7PM:

Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.): “Black Lives and Existence: Misadventures in Academic Philosophy”

Endeavoring to consider the lives and existence of folks of African descent using canonical agendas and resources of academic Philosophy has been a misadventure, constraining and distorting while leaving too much of living not considered and/or misconstrued, mis-valued. New ventures for considering, for philosophizing about Black lives and existence, are required ...