

An Invitation to Africana Philosophy of Education

Kathy Hytten

Southern Illinois University

In reflecting on Stephen Nathan Haymes thoughtful essay, “Africana Slave Religious Thought and the Philosophy of Education,” a passage from bell hooks kept coming to mind. Writing about theorizing as a form of liberatory practice, she offers, “I came to theory because I was hurting — the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most important, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.”¹ For hooks, theorizing — the heart of what we do as philosophers — is always an embodied and engaged activity. We theorize to make sense of the world around us and our place within it, to overcome suffering, and to find purpose and meaning in life. Reading bell hooks, I feel like theory really matters. It matters in how we live our everyday lives, and in how we imagine possibilities for living more fully in the present and future. This is not the feeling I most commonly get when I read the kinds of traditional, Western philosophy that Haymes alludes to in his essay. While there is certainly power and insight in the traditional philosophic canon, at the same time, so much of it feels distant, abstract, removed, and sterile. Africana philosophy offers us something that for me, feels different: engagement, potential empowerment, and often, seemingly more relevance.

The central claim in Haymes’s essay is that we as philosophers of education need to take Africana philosophy seriously. I whole-heartedly concur with this claim. In making the case for the value of Africana philosophy, Haymes does a nice job of illustrating how traditional Western philosophy tends to be overly driven by epistemological concerns, and moreover, how the racism embedded within the works of such figures as Kant, Hume, and Hegel is significantly problematic and compromises the worth and usefulness of their writings. He also thoughtfully responds to critics who argue that Africana philosophy is not real philosophy by showing how the ontological and spiritual concerns of Africana people are ultimately philosophical as they are grounded in theorizing about fundamental issues of human experience, existence, knowledge, purpose and values. Unfortunately, what Haymes does not have enough space to do in his essay is to give us much of a vision of what Africana philosophy looks like, beyond that it values ontology, spirituality, orality, myth, and the intertextuality of discourse. Without more specifics, it is difficult to see the important contribution to philosophy of education that can be had by seriously engaging Africana philosophy. Thus by way of both responding to, and advancing, Haymes’s argument, in the limited space I have available I would like highlight some of the important ways in which Africana philosophy can help us to uncover problematic assumptions and to think differently about our work as philosophers and educators. First, it can help us imagine alternative, more engaged, styles and forms of teaching and philosophizing, for example, as witnessed in bell

hooks's writings. Second, it challenges us to broaden our conception of epistemology and to recognize the intimate connections between culture and knowledge. Here Patricia Hill Collins's Afrocentric, feminist epistemology is particularly illustrative. Third, it provides us with an example of activist, interventionist, and social justice oriented philosophy, as in Cornel West's call for philosophy as a form of social and political engagement. Looking briefly at these ideas from hooks, Collins, and West helps to fill out Haymes's call for the value of Africana philosophy, as each of these thinkers exemplify one of the themes Haymes suggests distinguish this approach to philosophy.

According to Haymes, one of the unifying characteristics of Africana philosophy is "focus on the spiritual order of human existence." This attention to the spirit, as well as the soul, is prominent in bell hooks' writings. One of the greatest strengths of hooks's philosophizing is the way in which she articulates her ideas and experiences deeply, passionately, spiritually, and yet accessibly. She often writes in an eloquent narrative style that offers us an important complement to more traditional and abstract approaches to philosophizing. She advocates an embodied form of knowing and, consistently is critical of the Cartesian legacy in schools: teaching to minds only, as if the body were irrelevant to learning. Her engaged pedagogy aims to transcend limiting binaries, for example, between the mind and body, theory and practice, action and reflection, and the spiritual and the mundane. For her, education should care for both "the intellectual and spiritual growth" of students, and should emerge "from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than a separation of these elements."² In hooks's philosophy, we are provided with a nice example of the kind of teleological and ontological purposes that Haymes says are such an important part of Africana philosophy. That is, she sees the pedagogical as philosophical and calls for education to cultivate critical consciousness, freedom, self-actualization, and community empowerment.

A second theme that Haymes argues characterizes Africana philosophy is recognition of the cultural embeddedness of knowledge, as "how we come to define rationality or reason is bounded up with our particular heritage... [and] way of being-in-the-world." Attending to the connections between epistemology and culture provides an important corrective to the racism in white Western approaches to knowledge. Moreover, it helps us to disrupt the belief that only dominant cultural ways of knowing are worthy of focus in schools and thereby opens up the possibility for more genuine equality of educational opportunity. Collins outlines a black feminist epistemology that is grounded in the importance of community, experience, caring, ethics and accountability to knowing. Her epistemological approach draws on knowledge as a form of resistance to oppression and domination. Collins describes four dimensions to black feminist epistemology: experience as a criterion of meaning, dialogue to assess knowledge claims, an ethic of caring, and an ethic of personal accountability.³ She argues that knowledge should be built from concrete experiences and that it is developed in dialogue with community members. Caring for others, valuing expressiveness and emotions, drawing upon oral traditions, and

considering the integrity of knowers are all important in the assessment of knowledge claims. The value of attending to elements of such an alternative epistemology, especially in schools, is that it can help affirm the unique knowledge of Africana people and thus provide resources for empowering individuals and communities.

The call for communal empowerment is also an important part of a third feature of Africana philosophy as described by Haymes: “philosophical preoccupation with freedom and embodied agency of Africana people.” West’s prophetic pragmatism illustrates this concern for freedom and agency well. Prophetic pragmatism is marked by its social and political project of using knowledge to imagine a more enriching and more democratic future and acting to bring it into existence. West describes philosophy as a form of cultural critique that identifies social problems, uncovers institutional and structural inequities, promotes moral outrage at suffering and exploitation, organizes different social constituencies to alleviate such problems, and sustains faith in the ability of individuals to transform their world.⁴ For West, philosophical work brings with it an ethical responsibility to engage in real world struggles and “to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action... the moral aim of enriching individuals and expanding democracy.”⁵ This resonates with Haymes’s vision of Africana philosophy as enabling, creative, and inspiring of agency.

The ultimate strength of Haymes’s essay is that it provides us with an invitation to explore Africana philosophy, and powerful reasons for why we should do so. His passionate support for Africana philosophy inspired me to rethink how I have been moved by works I am familiar with in this genre. In terms of expanding the project further, there are several ideas and issues I would like to read more about. I am curious about the Africana philosophers from whom Haymes most draws his inspiration, especially those who are less well known in the literature, and what they can offer us in terms of a revitalized philosophy of education. I would also like to know more about how we can best draw upon the philosophical power and insights of myth. Finally, I want to learn more about how Africana philosophy can help us to define more “humanizing” aims for education that can assist us in overcoming some of the glaring educational inequities so prevalent in our society. Overall, however, I appreciate Haymes’s invitation to think more about this important topic and hope to see Africana philosophy more represented within our society, and in the philosophical literature more broadly, in the future.

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.

2. *Ibid.*, 13, 18.

3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 208-20.

4. See, for example, Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 139.

5. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 5.