

Thoughts About the Absence of Africana Philosophy in Philosophy of Education

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In “Performing Philosophy of Education ‘Whitely’: Reliable Narration as Racialized Practice,” Helen Anderson distinguishes between “whiteness,” the racial grouping based on skin color, and “whitely” or “whiteness,” the performance of that category, thus referring to race by the latter terms as a “way of being in the world,” one secured through the “performance of domination.” However, Anderson’s claim that whiteness is not “essentially” tied to color ignores the phenomenological viewpoint, from which it is possible to claim that white people do live color “essentially,” as though “naturally” or biologically superior to nonwhite people. Quoting Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, she asserts that “the dominant group makes itself through imagining itself as everything the Other is not,” while in *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon argues that in an antiblack world the black cannot be an Other to the white, because the black is without a first-person perspective, an ego, self, or “I.” Thus, Anderson does not address how reliable narration “naturalizes” nonwhites as always and forever incapable of having a perspective of their own in the world, at best only able to imitate the narrative form of whiteness. This essay provides us an opportunity to think about the absence of Africana or black philosophy in philosophy of education specifically, arguing that the reliable narration of the whiteness of contemporary philosophy of education seems to position nonwhites, and specifically Africana or black people, as incapable of doing philosophy, lacking the capacity to give meaning to their lived experiences and thus to constitute and reconstitute themselves as disembodied selves outside of space, place, and time.

Eighteenth-century Africana thinkers’ philosophical reflections on education are conspicuously absent from the historiography of Enlightenment educational philosophy; this absence is related to twentieth-century interpretations of that history. In philosophy of education’s collective writings, Enlightenment philosophical ideas are analyzed in relatively homogenous terms with respect to nationality, geography, race, and ethnicity, and the Enlightenment is taken as a unitary phenomenon in the history of ideas. These writings, whether anthologies of primary sources or edited book commentaries, fall short of their claim of a comprehensive history of ideas and theoretical commentary about the modern educational philosophical tradition.

For example, in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, Amélie Oskenberg Rorty describes her edited collection as a “comprehensive [philosophical] history of the aims and direction of education.”¹ The exemplars she includes are Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and Sigmund Freud — all of European

descent, except for the North African Augustine. This Western European bias similarly defines Rorty's selection of significant issues — epistemology, metaphysics, morality and ethics, ontology, and social and political theory. Rorty states: "A vital and robust philosophy of education inevitably incorporates virtually the whole of philosophy; and the study of the history of philosophy mandates reflection on its implications for education." Because in fact philosophy gets conceived as the exclusive province of European thinkers, and philosophy of education as emanating from this foundation, counter perspectives are eclipsed.

The recent anthology, *A Companion to Philosophy of Education*, edited by Randall Curren, remains within the gravitational field of this Eurocentric world. The table of contents reveals only a single exception to this bias in selection of worthy philosophers, the contemporary African American philosopher, Bernard Boxill. More importantly, this 627-page anthology renders Africana thought nonexistent as a distinct area. Though Curren does not claim "a comprehensive history" of philosophy of education like Rorty, he assumes that the Enlightenment is an exclusively European intellectual movement and that this tradition is the one destined to "continue to shape educational thought."²

Rorty and Curren (as well as others) fail to recognize that eighteenth-century Africana thought also emerged as part of the Enlightenment, encompassing theoretical questions raised by the historical project of conquest and colonization that began in 1492 and the subsequent struggles for emancipation. These questions reflect the "underside of modernity," rooted in how it was lived on the periphery by enslaved Africans and African-descended people in the New World.

Eighteenth-century Africana thinkers were former transatlantic slaves who learned to read and write while in bondage, and then were individually manumitted. The literature they produced included spiritual autobiographies, captivity narratives, travel narratives, public letters, sea adventures, and economic success stories — a literature of diasporic movement and cultural encounter. These writings reflect multiple layers of influence, suggesting the peculiar way that Western Africa, Western Europe, and the Americas were incorporated through transatlantic slavery into the thought of authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Phillis Wheatley, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Ignatius Sancho, John Marrant and John Jea. Autobiographical writing was the dominant style they used to articulate questions that were characteristically philosophical and moral and ethical in concern, regarding the self-formative processes involved in the transformation of Africans into "black people."

In *Race and Philosophy*, Lucius Outlaw distinguishes between literate Africana thought and Africana philosophy by their different modes of reflection. Africana philosophy relies on a third-order organizational strategy of reflecting on past and present literary or oral reflections of African and African-descended persons on their lived experiences. These "third-order reflections" build upon the "second-order" reflections of Africana thought, themselves based in reflections on lived experiences, what Outlaw calls the thinkers' "first order reality." Accordingly, Africana

philosophy is the product of formally trained contemporary African and African-descended philosophers engaged in the explicit development of discursive formations within the discipline of philosophy that are distinguished as being “African” or “African descended.” This work constitutes Africana philosophy as a field of discourse, “arranging, surveying and naming of the field,” though Outlaw argues that the meaning, integrity, and validity of these efforts are tied to “the prevailing norms of the local contexts in which [Africana thought] emerged, not to the third-order endeavor.” While eighteenth-century Africana thinkers were not self-consciously developing a distinct academic field of philosophical discourse, they were engaged in the ethical practice of “philosophizing” about the “black self” through their autobiographical writings.³

However, it does not necessarily follow that autobiographical writings are limited to reflecting directly on lived experience and thus are not philosophizing at the third-order level. Outlaw’s concern is that the subjective experiences that constitute and give meaning to the lived experiences of Africana thinkers, coupled with their diasporic autobiographical writings, are discursively unable to resolve problems of unity and commonality so as to generate a formal field of philosophical inquiry. However, this can be resolved by using “third order organizing, classificatory strategies directed at the lived experiences and second-order classifications of continental and diasporic Africans.” That is, Outlaw maintains that the subjectivity of lived experiences is mediated by rules of discourse conditioned by social and historical contingencies. But what Outlaw and others overlook is that the dominance of first-person writing amongst eighteenth-century Africana thinkers did not mean the absence of discursive rules. Such discursive rules played a part in determining the nature of the theoretical questions asked.

Only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did autobiographical writing become conceptualized as a separate genre governed by its own set of practices; at the center of these practices, and therefore the genre itself, is the “self.” But the construction of a canon of autobiographical writing and its conceptualization as a distinct genre had to do also with the construction of a conception of a European or European-descended moral self or “I” that was white, male, and middle-class. In *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England*, Felicity Nussbaum argues that three phenomena converged in eighteenth-century England that linked genre, class, and gender: She notes that “the conceptualization of ‘autobiography’ as a recognizable set of practices, distinct from other kinds of writing; and the use of autobiography as a technology of the middle-class self; were important to the assertion of a female identity in public print.”⁴ An informal period of writing that Nussbaum calls “self-biography” preceded the crystallization of the autobiographical canon and genre; in this period emerged the self-narrative, a subjectivity or speaking subject, the “I” narrating a text. Thus, the theoretical reflections that characterize autobiography are connected to some issue or problem related to the self. Eighteenth-century Africana thought encompassed precisely those theoretical questions raised by the historical project of conquest, colonization, and slavery and subsequent struggles for emancipation. The

Africana self-biographies discuss practical ethical questions about selfhood in the context of moral positions regarding racial slavery and its abolition, positions that led to questions about the worth of black people in an antiblack world. The autobiographies of Africana thinkers must be understood transculturally as a phenomenon of the “contact zone.” And while subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.

The use of reliable narration in the formation of white identity is born out of the European experience of colonization, slavery, and conquest. One way to understand the significance of reliable narration is to situate it in the emergence of educational philosophy, or “educational science,” before the 1830s, when it was not viewed or studied as a separate distinguishable discipline. Instead, the study of education was integrated with anthropology, history, jurisprudence, politics, psychology, and sociology, each of which also were not separate disciplines, but were, along with educational philosophy, integrated and subsumed under moral philosophy.

The formation and development of moral philosophy as the “science of man” and his self-formation was inseparable from the project of European imperialism. The travel writings of European adventurers and explorers in the New World, sub-Saharan Africa, and the South Pacific provided modern moral philosophy with ethnographic information about non-European peoples. This enabled European man to divide the world into different categories of people and represent himself as the “true” embodiment of “man.” European man is his own object of inquiry; he inquires into the laws that govern the life of man as a moral, political, historical, economic, and speaking being. These inquiries are contextualized by juxtaposing the European from the non-European, civilized from savage. Thus, Kant’s *Education* or Rousseau’s *Emile* and Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* were not written as separate educational philosophical texts but as part of these philosophers’ moral philosophies, supported empirically by ethnological and anthropological information about non-Europeans. The Enlightenment provided a scientific and philosophical vocabulary — race, progress, civilization, savagery, nature, and so on — that belongs to and reveals a larger world of analytical categories that exists as a universe of discourse that in turn determines not only how studies are done, but also appropriate objects of study. It is this vocabulary that perhaps has given philosophical narrative the form of reliable narration.

1. Amélie Oskenberg Rorty, ed., *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

2. Randall Curren, ed., *A Companion to Philosophy of Education* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

3. Lucis T. Outlaw, Jr., *On Race and Philosophy* ((New York: Routledge, 1996), 76–88.

4. Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).