

## Black Intellectual Tradition



Rather than a single black intellectual tradition, there are more properly black intellectual traditions. These are intellectual movements that have developed in the modern world out of the formation of black people, who in turn were formed from a diverse set of ethnic groups. Some emerged from the many African ethnicities brought under the rubric of "black." Others are from varieties of black-designated groups in southern Asia and the Pacific. The most dominant representatives have become the "black Atlantic" traditions, although in ancient times through the Middle Ages, there were black Mediterranean and other black traditions along the eastern coasts of Africa, as attested to by the Islamic thought of the Moors (such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun) on one hand, and the Abyssinians (Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat) on the other. This article will focus on the black Atlantic traditions.

### Pre-Twentieth Century Origins

The traditions that emerged in the Atlantic since the eighteenth century devoted much energy to themes of liberation from enslavement and colonialism and interrogating what it means to be human. A smaller line, whose intellectual descendants include contemporary black professional philosophers, focused on the reasoning involved in the prior two themes. That line also challenged the tendency to treat "black" and "intellectual" as incompatible combinations in the modern world. A unique feature of modern slavery was its accompanying racialism and racism. Those additions challenged the humanity of African and other designated black peoples. The intellectual response was an interrogation of the standards of human recognition and identification and the justificatory practices of freedom, a consideration shared with nearly all western traditions of the modern age. In his book *Caliban's Reason* (2000), Paget Henry organized these traditions through the lens of *poeticism* and *historicism*. The former addresses the three themes by examining the semiological practices that form the black self and argue for the transformation of those signs and symbols, especially through the resources of literature and poetry, for the proverbial liberation of the mind. The latter focuses on changing material conditions and history. The dichotomy is not, however, a neat one since fusions of poeticism and historicism are more often the case with each intellectual line.

Several lines of black thought, which form the black intellectual traditions, emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with influences to the present. The first brings together the three thematics of freedom, anthropology, and critical evaluations of justificatory practices through resources of philosophical, religious, scientific, and political thought. In this first line, there is a set of writers who do not lay claim to black specificity, although many such intellectuals recognize themselves as African, "Negro," or black. Exemplars include Anton Wilhelm Amo (also known as Antonius Guilelmus Amo Afer), who taught as a professor of philosophy at the universities of Halle and Jena in the eighteenth century; Benjamin Banneker, the famed freed-black scientist of the same period; and Ottobah Cougano, a former slave whose main work has received philosophical attention over the past decade. And then there are those who work with an abiding concern for the construction of *black* or, in their time, *Negro* thought. Those include David

Walker, Martin Delaney, Alexander Crummell, Anténor Firmin, and Marcus Garvey in the nineteenth century through early twentieth. A second line is primarily autobiographical, with writings that became known as the slave narratives. Cougano is included here, along with Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. The grammar of these narratives has affected black autobiographical reflection in the black intellectual traditions across the Diaspora, as attested by the narratives of Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois in North America, Sol Plaatje in Southern Africa, and Aimé Césaire in the Caribbean. The autobiographical writings of these authors (among others) have had an enormous impact on the study of literature in the American academy, especially since the 1980s.

## Political Context of Black Intellectual Traditions

Black intellectual traditions have been embedded in the politics of the modern world and prior to the 1980s have been rooted in such nonacademic institutions as churches, mosques, and synagogues; political parties and unions. Alternative organizations and movements have been the forums in which their ideas were typically developed. The consequence is that black intellectual traditions have been generally organized under the rubrics of: (1) black nationalism, with internationalist and localist variations, (2) black liberalism, (3) black left-wing radicalism, and (4) black conservatism. These are not neat designations because these various traditions overlap with each other. For instance, there have been black conservatives who were nationalists and those who were not; there were black liberals who were antinationalists and those who were otherwise. There are, however, some clearly identifiable genealogical patterns.

(1) *Black nationalism*. The work of David Walker, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, Anténor Firmin, and Marcus Garvey, for instance, were foundational for black movements such as Pan-Africanism (1900 onward), the Harlem Renaissance (1920s), Negritude (1930s), Black Power (late 1950s into the 1960s), the Black Arts Movement (1960s), Black Theology (from 1950s but linked to Black Power in the 1960s onward), (to some extent) the Black Consciousness movement of South Africa and Britain (1970s), and Afrocentrism and Afrocentricity (1980s). The main tenets of the variety of traditions that grew out of black nationalism are (a) the necessity of black solidarity for the liberation of black people, (b) the distinctness of black or African peoples either racially, culturally, historically, psychologically, or politically, and (c) the importance of forming and maintaining uniquely black institutions.

(2) *Liberal line*. The exemplar of the liberal line was Frederick Douglass, although we should bear in mind that his liberalism, because of its foundations in abolitionism, was "radical" in the nineteenth century. Although Benjamin Banneker preceded him in the liberal tradition, Douglass's oratory skills and prolific writings on political matters made him the towering figure of black liberal republicanism before the twentieth century. Subsequent exemplars include the young W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Houston (architect of the legal strategy against American apartheid), Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Jr. (who, like Douglass, also inspired a more radical left-wing line), and Derrick Bell (one of the major proponents of the critical legal-studies movement). The black liberal tradition focuses on black inclusion in world affairs. Its main aim is equality, sometimes to the point of espousing colorblind policies. The more left-oriented black liberal tradition adds considerations for disadvantaged groups, which places that tradition in debates over such social remedies as affirmative action and reparations.

(3) *Radical line*. Black left-wing radicalism has been the only kind of radical black tradition. Although some critics, such as Paul Gilroy in his book *Against Race* (2000), have described some black nationalist movements as "fascist," there has never been a black right-wing radical movement. The left-wing movements have, however, suffered a splintered history because of the role black nationalism has played as a counter-hegemonic response to antiblack racist states. That Marxism's critique of capitalism focused on the same states led to inevitable convergence and conflict with that tradition. The convergence was against racism, which Marxists saw as exploitation. The divide was on Marxist universalism. Marxism called for black intellectuals to appear universally as part of or in solidarity with the working class. Black nationalists were suspicious of an antiblack racist working class. The radical black nationalists and the Marxists, however, argued for the necessity of revolutionary change for black liberation.

The genealogy of the Marxist line was inspired by Marx himself and the various divisions that followed. His son-in-law Paul Lafargue was a major nineteenth-century figure and, as with the other traditions, there are overlaps with others, as Cedric Robinson shows in his monumental study *Black Marxism* (1983). Thus, figures of the pan-African, Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, Black Power, Black Theology, and Black Consciousness, such as Claude McKay, Paul Robeson, (early) Richard Wright, Claudette Jones, Aimé Césaire, Kwame Nkrumah, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Julius

Nyerere, Oliver Cox, Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, Steve Biko, Hewey Newton, Manning Marable, Angela Davis, and (early) Cornel West are exemplars of the Afro-Marxist tradition. A crucial feature of this tradition, as with the others, is that it exceeds mere application of the organizing tenet, which is, in this case, Marxism.

(4) *Conservative line*. The tradition of black conservatism shares some of the challenges to categorization. There are black conservatives who share much with other conservative movements, and there is the distinction between black cultural conservatives and other kinds. Black nationalists, for example, often have culturally conservative views while espousing independence for black nations. The standard genealogy regards Booker T. Washington, however, as the father of black conservatism, although similar ideas could be found in the thought of some blacks in Europe from the eighteenth century, such as Jacobus Capitein. As with all subsequent conservatives, Washington's thought focused on self-reliance and prioritized the material acquisition of wealth. Power, for such conservatives, is achieved by economic means, which is one of the points of convergence with some forms of black nationalism. Cornel West, in his book *Prophesy, Deliverance!* (1982), identified another feature of black conservatism. That tradition also focuses on the notion of black exceptionalism, which argues (1) that there are exceptional blacks who lack the pathologies of most blacks or (2) that black people, as a group, are exceptional in the modern age. The first claim is more dominant. The latter has roots as well in Alexander Crummell, whose philosophy of civilization defended blacks as an adaptable race that could create a synthesis of the best of Anglo-Christian civilization. The picture, then, is one not so much of a black conservative tradition so much as conservatism across black traditions with a few high-profile exemplars of black conservatism. Since the 1960s, those individuals have been almost entirely linked to conservative think-tanks such as the Hoover Institute and the Manhattan Institute. They include Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, Condoleezza Rice, and, more recently, John McWhorter. A difficulty with classifying this tradition, however, is that, as with other conservative movements, proponents sometimes refer to themselves as "classical liberals" or "libertarians." Thus, there could be many individuals listed in one category who may also belong to the other. William Julius Wilson, a major sociologist in neoliberal circles because of his books *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the most influential literary scholar within the same political matrix because of his advocacy of intellectual entrepreneurship, have offered much for neoconservatives as well, and they are read as more conservative than they may wish to be read by the black Left.

## Contemporary Black Intellectual Traditions

Turning to contemporary black thought, we can identify six major traditions, each of which has in some ways crossed the political lines outlined above: (1) black feminism, (2) black religious thought, (2) black pragmatism, (3) black existentialism, (4) black postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and cultural and queer studies, (5) Afrocentrism, Afrocentricity, and Africology, and (6) Africana thought. As with the other formulations, there is much overlap among these traditions and between even seemingly opposing ones.

## Black Feminism

Black feminism has roots in the nineteenth century in the thought of Maria Stewart, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and the many women in the Black Women's Club Movement. This tradition has representatives that range from liberal to radical Left, and it includes cultural conservatives such as Stewart, who argued that black women should exemplify Victorian virtues of grace and purity. The twentieth century had a broad range of writings and movements that could be characterized as black feminist. They include Marxists such as Suzanne Césaire, Claudette Jones, and Angela Davis, and creative writers and musicians such as Toni Cade Bambara, editor of *The Black Woman* (1970), Alice Walker, and Abbey Lincoln. Among the former, Davis argued for the importance of studying the plight of black women for the understanding of American capitalism and freedom struggles.

Research on this group grew significantly in the academy in the 1980s, which resulted in the emergence of an array of black feminist writers across the poeticist and historicist lines. They include literary scholars such as Barbara Christian, Michelle Wallace, Gloria Watkins/bell hooks, whose 1981 text *"Ain't I a Woman?": Feminism from Margin to Center*, was extraordinarily influential in the development of postmodern feminist scholarship, Hazel Carby, and Johnella Butler; social scientists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Joy Ann James; theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant and Delores Williams.

The main concerns of black feminism range from equality for black women to the privileging of black women's perspectives, experiences, and political location in all aspects of social life. Its development has posed challenges to the foundations of many fields in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences by bringing intersecting considerations of gender and race to bear on methodological assumptions and data. These ideas are brought to the fore in Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Writing primarily from the perspective of postmodern epistemology, Collins offered a portrait of black feminist thought as organically linked to black female struggles for justice and freedom.

## Black Religious Thought

Black religious thought, as with the others, is a diverse tradition. At first primarily of a protest kind, as with David Walker, Maria Stewart, and Nat Turner, it expanded through the thematics of identity, liberation, and critical reflection on thought as found in the writings of Alexander Crummell in the late nineteenth century, through to Marcus Garvey, Howard Thurman and then on to Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Cone, William R. Jones, Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, M. Shawn Copeland, Dwight Hopkins, Josiah Young, and Cornel West. Garvey's impact on religion has a lasting legacy in Ethiopianism in the United States and the Rastafari movement in Jamaica, which, through the music of Bob Marley and other reggae artists such as Peter Tosh and Burning Spear/Winston Rodney, continues to offer countercultural symbols of black liberation and a theology of redemption. To these should be added the ethical and political writings of African religious writers such as John Mbiti, Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and Elias Bongmba.

The black religious intellectual tradition has a practical and theoretical end. The practical end has focused on offering leadership that fuses religious-ethical and political concerns. These include the many clergymen and women in black religious institutions over the past three centuries. These institutions included black churches, synagogues, mosques, and even Freemason lodges, especially the mechanics lodges, and their impact on avowedly secular organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and even the Communist-supported International Labor Defense (ILD), through the rallying force of spirituals and black gospel music on one hand and the organizational structures and oratory techniques on the other. The crowning moment of that tradition in the United States was the Civil Rights Movement; in South Africa, it was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The greatest ministerial exemplar of the former was Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Tutu for the latter. In the political arena, the two correlates are Barack Obama in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

Black religious theoretical focus has been primarily on the theodicean question of black suffering (from colonialism, slavery, and institutional racism/apartheid) and on the relevance of religion to projects of historical transformation. In terms of the former, the work that has had the most impact on theological studies is James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975), where, through his interpretation of the Christ-figure as an exemplar of suffering, Cone offers a hermeneutical reading of a black Christ (in a tradition that goes back to other black writers from the early twentieth century). The theodicean critique of this work is advanced by, among others, William R. Jones's *Is God a White Racist?: A Prolegomenon to Black Theology* (1973), where the author argues that black liberation requires secular humanistic agency because theories calling for divine intervention in history and providential readings are equally supported by opposite conclusions. Cone's writings have, however, had an impact on seminaries and on the secular study of religion in the American academy, and his students, such as Dwight Hopkins and Josiah Young III, have brought such ideas in dialogue with theologians and religious practitioners across the Atlantic.

## The Black Pragmatist Tradition

The next major shift is Cornel West's *Prophesy, Deliverance!* (1982), which inaugurated prophetic pragmatic thought and offered an approach to the study of religion that shifted focus from scriptural interpretation and the symbolism of the divine to social criticism. That work also had an impact on the black pragmatist tradition, which has since then been read retroactively through prophetic pragmatism. West's work has also affected the study of classical pragmatist John Dewey and the cultivation of an *American* conception of black politics. The influence of this tradition is particularly strong at such institutions as Princeton University and Harvard University and the Democratic Socialists of America.

The pragmatist line also includes scholars such as Leonard Harris—whose interpretation of pragmatism includes Alain Locke, the famed philosopher and literary critic of the Harlem Renaissance—and a host of contemporary black public intellectuals such as Michael Eric Dyson and Eddie Glaude, Jr.

## Black Existential Traditions

Black existentialism also overlaps with the other traditions, although it is particularly pronounced among the poeticists until the emergence of poststructuralism. The genealogical line formally begins with Richard Wright's novels and essays (although theoretical foundations rest in the thought of earlier social and political writers such as Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois), and includes writings by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, (the early) Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Monifa Love, although an existential reading could be made of the writings of earlier authors such as James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston; as well as more explicitly theoretical work by Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, Noel Manganyi, William R. Jones, Cornel West, Tsenay Serequeberhan, P. Mabogo More, Paget Henry, Danielle Davis, and Lewis Gordon. (In addition to Biko, Manganyi and More offer perspectives from South Africa; Serequeberhan from Eritrea; and Davis from Australia.) There is a strong blues dimension of black existential thought, where the blues is understood as addressing problems of suffering while affirming the value of life. This understanding of the blues as an existential form pertains as well to jazz, one of its progeny. The influence that jazz, especially Be-Bop, had on existentialism of all kinds was significant. Among the many influential composers and instrumentalists in this regard were Charley Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Mary Lou Williams, Don Cherry, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor; and singers such as Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Dinah Washington.

The black existentialist traditions have influenced several other traditions. For instance, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) have had an impact across the humanities and social sciences. Brought together with W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), these texts explore how racism and colonialism affected the methodologies of the human sciences in their construction of problem people. From Du Bois, there is also the phenomenological problematizing of black existence in terms of double consciousness, where black phenomena are first understood in terms of a white normative perspective and then that point of view is also brought under interrogation. The eventual reflection that emerges is the realization of the contradictions lived by problem people in a society espousing universal accessibility. Imposed double standards and the concomitant consciousness of such permeate the critical reflections in the many black intellectual traditions. Dimensions of the black existential traditions are explored in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (1997), edited by Lewis Gordon and in *Existencia Africana* (2000) by the same author. Black existentialism, as outlined in those texts, deals with problems of meaning and its formation under antiblack conditions, the construction of human standards and dynamics of recognition, problems of agency and social change, conditions of freedom, and problems of justification and method.

## Black Postmodernism

The postmodernist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, cultural studies, and queer studies traditions (the use of "traditions" being an oxymoron in the eyes of many of their proponents) rose with the new literary studies and the influence of New Left French thought in the western academy. Their focus is on criticism, the politics of texts, antiessentialism, anticentrism, valorization of peripheries, and the rejection of unified and global theories. Their main influence has been the French structuralist and poststructuralist movements, such as those articulated by such authors as Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, although many proponents espouse Marxist origins. In Britain, for instance, the main genealogical line is from Stuart Hall, former director of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University and the mentor of Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, and Isaac Julien. Hall's writings were a fusion of the Marxism of Antonio Gramsci and the structural Marxism of Althusser with a focus on social criticism and, later on, psychoanalytical themes. In North America and the Caribbean, proponents include Houston Baker, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., bell hooks/Gloria Watkins, Patricia Hill Collins, (the later) Angela Davis, and Sylvia Wynter.

Although many influential books and articles have been written by this predominantly literary group of scholars, the sociologist Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) has continued to enjoy an extraordinary influence. The text offers a critique of the nation as the founding trope in the study of diasporic peoples and a future-oriented conception of

reason and literacy that challenges the tendencies to reduce black subjects to pre-literate oral cultures on the one hand and overly textualized and present-centered subjects on the other.

Correlated with the rise of black postmodern cultural studies was also the emergence of rap and hip hop. Although mostly thought of as a musical development of protest entertainment from black and Latino youth of the inner cities of the northeastern United States, its influence has spanned the globe as the epitome of black diasporic youth culture. In addition to the aesthetic challenges posed by hip hop, which ranged from emphases on technology and, at times, even antimusicianship, and an antiestablishment fashion sensibility that even valorizes gangsterism, hip hop counts as a black intellectual tradition with genealogical links to the Black Aesthetics movement of the 1960s. Social criticism in hip hop often addresses racism through focus on the economy, prison system and double standards of law enforcement, and the political hypocrisy of national leaders. As with the other traditions, diversity ranges from politically progressive to reactionary positions. Hip hop is often criticized as misogynistic, hypermaterialistic, predominantly capitalist, and violent, while at the same time being the leitmotif of the postmodern moment. Analyses by Tricia Rose and Houston Baker, Jr., point to the difference between earlier forms of hip hop that focused on the formation of the self and social criticism, as found in artists such as The Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash, and KRS-One and later forms, which, although begun as protest, welcomed commodification.

### Afrocentrism, Afrocentric, and Africological Traditions

Afrocentrism, Afrocentricity, and Africology, rooted in the black nationalist traditions, offer a primarily historicist account of black agency in history through the advancement of notions of centeredness. This tradition also makes an appeal to Afro-classicism, where proponents consider ancient civilizations of Africa as foundational and has argued for an understanding of African American (and related) Studies as an independent discipline. Critics have waged severe attacks on this tradition, accusing its proponents of cultivating myths instead of scholarship on the one hand or being too western in their methodology on the other. In response, supporters have pointed to the double standards imposed upon them versus other intellectual movements: there is a long (and continued) history of mythic work in many other intellectual traditions and the academy supports methodologically conservative scholars.

The genealogical ancestry of this tradition is from the proto-black nationalist thought of the nineteenth century, especially that of Martin Delany and Edward Blyden, and, from the twentieth century, Cheikh Anta Diop's work on classical black civilizations and Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Black Intellectual* (1967), but its three main proponents are Maulana Karenga, Molefi Asante, and Ama Mazama. The latter three authors are extraordinarily prolific, but the reader should consult Asante's *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987) and for an overview *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (2007).

### The Africana Philosophical Traditions

Finally, there is the recent development of Africana philosophical thought, and within it the various lines of African philosophy, African-American philosophy, and Afro-Caribbean philosophy. Although the term "Africana" preceded its development in philosophy in the 1980s, the term acquired normative force in the thought of Lucius T. Outlaw's *On Race and Philosophy* (1996) and others as a way of referring to the black Diaspora of African origins. Because Australian First Peoples are also black peoples but with a more distant African narrative instead of the one of dispersal in the modern world, the Africana designation refers more specifically to African thought.

Sylvia Wynter, in her essay "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project," has criticized the Africana movement, including the African-American ethnic variations offered by the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as a reformation of the more politically charged and potent Black designation. The Africana tradition includes writers, however, who see it as a subset of black and vice versa. In other words, for some, Africana thought includes black thought, but not exclusively such. And similarly, black thought includes some Africana thought, but not all. There is, for instance, a movement of Africana intellectuals who regard Africana and black as creolized or mixed categories, and who argue that the black intellectual tradition has always been a mixed one, not only in racialized but also in cultural terms. Thus, Afro-Native American, Afro-Latino, and Afro-Asiatic traditions, or, as some such as Claudia Milian and Nelson Maldonado-Torres have argued, other levels of mixture such as borders and double consciousness, temporal displacement and post-(geo)continental concerns are part of the Africana designation.

Africana philosophy, where Africana thought receives much attention, is the most recent of all the other black intellectual traditions in the western academy. Although scholarship in the field points to philosophical work of more than a millennium in some instances and more than two millennia in others, its main contribution has been its focus on the third thematic of metacritique and justificatory practices as outlined earlier, without sacrificing philosophical, anthropological, and liberatory concerns.

The text that brought the professional African philosophical tradition to attention was John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), which brought ethnophilosophical examinations of east African conceptions of time under philosophical scrutiny. The text received severe criticism by many scholars, but the result was a body of literature ranging from Paulin Hountondji's *Sur la "philosophie africaine"* (1976) [available in English as *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983)] and Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (1987) to D. A. Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1994), where problematics in African philosophy ranging from studies of sage or traditional thought to analytical treatments of philosophical contemporary philosophical problems in the African context are explored.

African-American philosophy has been touched upon in various ways throughout this article, but additions should include the anthology *Philosophy Born of Struggle* (1983), edited by Leonard Harris, and for the Afro-Caribbean tradition, Paget Henry's *Caliban's Reason* (2000).

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