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WHAT IS AFRICANA CRITICAL THEORY OR BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY?

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In this article, the author argues that Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy is the philosophical discourse that critiques domination and affirms the empowerment of Black people in the world. However, although Africana critical theory shares similar concerns and themes such as existence, consciousness, trepidation, meaninglessness, hopelessness, fear, despair, servility, and abasement with European existentialism, there are important distinctions between them. For example, although European existentialism is, as Gordon says, "predicated on the uniqueness of the individual as well as on a universalist conception of humans and their obligation to self," Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy is predicated on the liberation of all Black people in the world from oppression.

Keywords: Afrocentricity; Africana critical theory; Africana philosophy; African philosophy; Black existential philosophy

Although much has been written on Afrocentricity (Asante, 1987, 1988, 1992) and African philosophy (Brown, 2004; Eze, 1997; Gyekye, 1995; Mbiti, 1970), very little is known about Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy in the academic literature. However, a critical look at most of the African and African American autobiographical narratives reveals that these writers profess the philosophy generally known as Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy\(^1\) as they raised questions of African and African American existence, being, consciousness, hopelessness, helplessness, oppression, human predicament, and empowerment. Gordon (1997) defines Black existential philosophy, otherwise termed
Africana critical theory in this article, as “philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (p. 3). He makes the distinction between Black existential philosophy and existentialism by arguing that existentialism is “a fundamentally European historical phenomenon,” whereas Black existential philosophy is “the existential demand for recognizing the situation or lived-context of Africana people’s being-in-the-world” (pp. 3, 4). Gordon goes on to add that although some Black existential theorists (such as Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois) were exposed to European ideas and thoughts through higher education, others (such as Malcolm X) had good reason to raise existential questions of liberation and identity without such external influences “by virtue of the historical fact of racial oppression manifested most vividly in the European and Arabic slave trades and the European colonization of the African continent and the entire world of color” (p. 3). I agree with this assertion in its entirety.

However, what Gordon (1997) calls Black existential philosophy or philosophy of existence, Outlaw (1992-1993) calls Africana philosophy. Outlaw defines Africana philosophy as

a “gathering” notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.), and traditions of Africans and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the sub discipline- or field-forming, tradition-defining or tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy. (p. 64)

He goes on to argue that “Philosophizing is inherently grounded in socially shared practices, not in transcendental rules,” because when we examine the works of the Western philosophers, we notice that they share commonality only in the very general sense. Therefore, “all philosophical ideals are local to communities of thinkers” (p. 73). Outlaw thinks that it is misleading for us to look for something more than “family resemblances” common to all activities we describe as philosophy. As he sees it, philosophy is the “systematic reflection on various aspects, in various areas, of experience (with) the end of facilitating ordered, meaningful existence” (p. 73).

He goes on to argue that Africana philosophy is a recognized discursive venture that organizes data, information, instances,
accounts, and reflections in systematic ways including but not limited to important cases, practices, and “traditions of discourse which were not themselves conditioned by an explicit sense on the part of those involved that they were engaged in something called ‘philosophy’ or ‘Africana philosophy’” (p. 73). A good example here is Malcolm X. Outlaw concludes that Africana philosophy is most often constructed through a “third-order surveying, (ordering) and arranging of discursive practices and literatures according to an agenda,” because “African thought are to be found in the customs, beliefs, traditions, values, sociopolitical institutions, and historical experiences of African societies” (p. 75).

However, Rabaka (2002) argues that Africana philosophy is not synonymous with Africana critical theory because Africana philosophy is concerned only with “identifying, reconstructing, and creating traditions and repositories for thought of continental and diasporan Africans” (p. 151), whereas Africana critical theory is “theory critical of domination and discrimination in continental and diasporan African life-worlds and lived experiences” (p. 147). He goes on to say that Africana critical theory “critiques not simply imperialism but the anti-imperial theory and praxis of the past—as in Malcolm X’s social and political thought—to better confront, contradict, and correct domination in the present and offer alternatives for liberation in the future” (p. 151). Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy therefore is concerned with the critique of Black subjugation and dehumanization, for as Asante (1992) has noted, European slave traders moved Africans off of physical terms; missionaries and settlers moved Africans off of religious terms; and capitalists moved Africans off of economic terms. . . . To reclaim a centered place in economic, social, or political contexts, the African must first find centering in a (philosophical), cultural and psychological sense. (p. 173)

In founding Muslim Mosque, Inc., for instance, Malcolm X (1992a) noted, “Muslim Mosque, Inc. will be the working base for an action program designed to eliminate the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and the social degradation suffered...
daily by twenty-two million Afro-Americans” (p. 316). Indeed, Malcolm X, like many other Africana critical theorists, awakened “black people’s moral outrage and consciousness to the persistence of racism, exploitation and psychological oppression in America” (Karenga, 1993, p. 9). His Organization of Afro-American Unity was to “create a cadre of intellectuals and activists who would work together to formulate a social, political, and economic network for creating consciousness among black people” (Smallwood, 2001, p. 17), because he realized that “cultural self-determination [was] a prerequisite for the liberation of people of African descent from various forms of oppression” (Stewart, 2001, p. iii). Hernton (1966) maintains that “Malcolm X was an existential Negro who came to possess the rare gift of metamorphosing others like himself from depraved and hopeless men locked in themselves to enlightened men freed for themselves” (pp. 102-103).

However, an important distinction must be made here between European existentialism and Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy, because although European existentialism and Africana critical theory address similar concerns, themes, issues, and problems such as existence, consciousness, trepidation, meaninglessness, hopelessness, fear, despair, servility, abasement, and love, there are fundamental differences in their approaches. For example, although European existentialism is “predicated on the uniqueness of the individual as well as on a universalist conception of humans and their obligation to self” (see Gordon, 1997, pp. 1-9), Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy is predicated on the liberation of all Black people in the world from oppression. Oaklander (1992), for instance, defines the subject matter of existentialism as the “individual qua individual,” that is, the study of the living, existing individual. In other words, the subject matter of existentialism is the concrete, existing, living individual. Kierkegaard (1944) made the case for individual existence in this manner:

Two ways, in general, are open for an existing individual: Either he can do his utmost to forget that he is an existing individual, by which he becomes a comic figure, since existence has a remarkable trait of
compelling an existing individual to exist whether he will it or not. . . . Or he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual. (p. 3)

Indeed, in Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre (1973a) stated that human reality is for itself. He also noted that consciousness should be consciousness for itself. On the contrary, Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy is the struggle for liberation of all Black people in the world against nonbeing predicated on Black people’s common experience in slavery and colonialism (Gordon, 1997; see also Outlaw, 1992-1993). Outlaw (1992-1993) makes this point even better than I can when he states,

The rupture of “traditional” experiences came when millions of heretofore relatively distinct groups of African peoples were thrown together in the crucible of the system of colonization, enslavement, and dispersion fashioned by that unstable racial and ethnic cultural complexity referred to as “European civilization.”

These mediators were themselves generally unified in the oppression of African peoples and in the shared sense that “they,” contrary to African “others,” constituted (or were the harbingers of) “civilization.”

Hence, the emergence of “philosophy” in Africa and the diaspora as a posttraditional discursive enterprise bearing that name is conditioned by the historical circumstances of domination of Africans and people of African descent by “Europeans” and European descendants. (p. 75)

Indeed, Rajiv (1992) argues that the “white concept of self can exist independent of the larger community whereas the black self is deeply entrenched in the collective experience of his race” (p. 32). Citing Stephen Butterfield, Rajiv goes on to argue that

The Western “self,” the concept of identity that dominates most well-known white personal narratives since the Renaissance, is the individual forging a career, a reputation, a business, or a family out of the raw material of his neighbors. Other people are rungs on the ladder of his success or reflections of his greatness. (p. 32)
She adds that “black autobiographers do not confine themselves merely to a personal reminiscence [but] move on to the treatment of community as a whole,” whereas the “white autobiographer confines his experience to the development of the self, in (most) cases unrelated to the community.” She concludes that “Black writers offer a model of the self which is different from white models, created in response to a different perception of history and revealing divergent often completely opposite meanings to human actions” (p. 32). This is to say, in their works, Africana critical theorists or Black existential thinkers protest on behalf of their race as a whole rather than on behalf of the individual. Malcolm X, for instance, saw Black oppression in the United States as linked to Black oppression in Africa and to the oppression of all the colored people in the world.

Indeed, Africana critical theorists are well aware that for the oppressed, individual consciousness is inextricably linked to the collective. A few examples will make the distinction between existentialism and Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy clear. Jean-Paul Sartre (1973b, p. 28), the most renowned 20th-century existentialist, for example, argued that “Man (singular) is nothing else but what he makes of himself,” which is the first principle of existentialism. For his own part, Martin Buber (1958; another existentialist) was concerned with individual meaning, that is, how an individual should determine his or her own reality or how an individual can come to an awareness of his or her subjective reality. Malcolm X (a Black existential thinker), on the other hand, was concerned about African American consciousness as a whole or the meaning of being Black in America. Rajiv (1992) argues that European existentialism and autobiographies fall within “European genre committed to individualism,” whereas Malcolm’s project was the discovery of new identity for Blacks in America that did not take on an individual course but indeed remained a public or a communal project. It must be noted that other Black existential thinkers have posed similar existential questions for Black people in the world. Lewis R. Gordon (1997), for instance, asked what should “be done in a world of near universal sense of superiority to, if not universal hatred of, black folks?” (p. 1). Frantz Fanon (1963) wrote...
about “the psychology of the colonized and their path to liberation” (cover pg.). President Nelson Mandela (1995), in his autobiography, noted,

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like me. (p. 624)

James Baldwin once said, “To be black in America is to be in rage all the time” (cited in Mathabane, 1989, p. 190). According to Floyd W. Hayes, III (1997, p. 174), Richard Wright raised the question “whether black men could live with dignity and without fear in a world dominated by white male power,” given the abject poverty under which he grew up and the racism against Blacks in America. Malcolm X (1970) stated that African Americans were treated like numbers or things within the American experience. He noted, “In this particular society, as we function and fit into it right now, we’re such an underdog, we’re trampled upon, we’re looked upon as almost nothing” (p. 4). Gloria Watkins pondered over Black existence in a world predominantly hostile to Black humanity. Whereas Black existential thinkers worry about the collective, European existentialists, on the other hand, are concerned about the individual. Martin Buber, for example, argued that individuals were treated like objects in business, religion, science, government, and education. European existentialism, then, is concerned with the place of the individual in the world, whereas Black existential philosophy or Africana critical theory is concerned with the collective, particularly the Black collective. Therefore, whereas European existentialists advocate freedom of choice for the individual, Africana critical theorists are concerned with the way human frailties (slavery, colonialism, and oppression) have hindered Black people from achieving their freedom. Perhaps the best distinction between existentialism and Africana critical theory is made by Asante (1992) as he argues that

the major problem with existentialism, phenomenology, and structuralism, for example, is that they have hedged their bets in a
European worldview that is moribund when it comes to looking at the outside world. *They cannot truly grasp the significance of a revolutionary idea that would change the European method itself.* (p. vi)

Another distinction here is that Africana critical theorists call into question Eurocentric views and critique domination and hegemony rather than just talk about it. Indeed, Rajiv (1992) maintains that “Because of the commonality of their experience, black autobiographies enact the drama of the entire race rather than of an individual as one notices in white autobiographies” (p. ii). She goes on to argue that because Black sensitivities are different from White sensitivities, Black autobiographers document their histories from the consciousness of their collective experiences, whereas White autobiographers are committed to the traditional European genre, which is enshrined in individualism. She concludes that “Black autobiographies are closer to factual reality, they catch the contours of black consciousness in their vibrant form,” because

black autobiography has to do with the black experience, how it felt to be a black and a slave, how the world looked through the eyes of one who had achieved a measure of freedom by effort and suffering, who the people were who had passed through the ordeal, how they had expressed their thoughts and feelings. (p. ii)

Indeed, she points out that Black writers offer a form of consciousness that is quite different from the White genre. Malcolm X (1965), for instance, once stated, “We can not think of being acceptable to others until we have first proven acceptable to ourselves” (p. 22); in which case, whereas “the white concept of self can exist independent of the larger community, the black self is deeply entrenched in the collective experience of the race” (Rajiv, 1992, p. 32). It is therefore little wonder that Malcolm X spent most of his adult life deliberating and addressing the concerns of African American existence (*being*) in the United States in light of his personal, moral, and social experiences. He sought to bring to the fore African American concerns regarding their existence in America and was particular about Black existence in the philosophical, cultural, and historical context.
Indeed, Malcolm addressed himself to the African American situation as he himself was involved in it. In Cone’s (1991) words, Malcolm X expressed “what it felt like to be black in white America,” (p. 16) and “spoke from the authority of his experience.” That is, he spoke of a society where being White was a haven, with its guarantees of power, privileges, and comfort, and being Black meant misery, degradation, and sufferings. But Malcolm said to America, “We, African Americans ‘exist’, we must be treated fairly, with equality and with respect” (cited in Bassey, 2005, p. 9; see also Malcolm X, 1971, p. 43). Indeed, in a conversation with Kenneth Clark, James Baldwin described Malcolm X’s movement as “the only movement in the country that you can call grassroots” (cited in Rajiv, 1992, p. 82). He went on to add,

When Malcolm talks or the Muslim ministers talk, they articulate for all the Negro people who hear them, who listen to them. They articulate their suffering, the suffering which has been in this country so long denied. That’s Malcolm’s great authority over any of his audiences. He corroborates their reality; he tells them that they really exist. (Rajiv, 1992, p. 82)

Indeed, Hernton (1966) maintains that Malcolm “was the only man, black or white, who could articulate, in the living language of the ghetto, the intimate agonies of the people, and transform them into a weapon of revolution” (p. 102). Malcolm dealt with “issues of personal identity and the meaning of life” for African Americans. He was also very concerned about issues of fairness and distributive justice in America and was even more concerned about respect and dignity for all. Malcolm’s message had a profound effect on African American self-consciousness and worldview. Smallwood (2001) describes Malcolm X as a “pre-cursor to the Afrocentric Perspective,” one who advocated “cultural pride and the celebration of black people.” “At the crux of Malcolm’s concerns,” Smallwood continues, “were the negative conditions and representation of African Americans in society. As a result, he was an advocate for Black cultural expression and African unity in the diaspora” (p. 17). LeRoi Jones (1966) argues that “as a minister for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm talked about a black consciousness
that took its form from religion. In his last days he talked of another black consciousness that proposed politics as its moving energy” (p. 241). He concludes that on the whole, “Malcolm’s greatest contribution, other than to propose a path to internationalism . . . was to preach Black Consciousness to the Black Man” (p. 241). To Malcolm, connections with and “obligations to the freedom of his fellow black people were important facts of his existence.” Hence, he said,

No matter how much respect, no matter how much recognition, whites show towards me, as far as I’m concerned, as long as it is not shown to every one of our people in this country, it doesn’t exist for me.

In answer to a question in 1964, Malcolm X (1965) also said, “My first concern is with the group of people to which I belong, the Afro-americans, for we, more than any other people, are deprived of these inalienable rights” (p. 59).

LeRoi Jones (1966) maintains that “Malcolm’s earlier counsels was his explicit call for a National Consciousness among Black People.” He goes on to say that “this aspect of Malcolm’s philosophy certainly did abide throughout his days” (p. 241). In an interview with Robert Penn Warren (1965), Malcolm extolled the place of freedom and self-consciousness in the Islamic religion in the following words:

The religion of Islam actually restores one’s human feelings—human rights, human incentives—his talent. It brings out of the individual all of his dormant potential. It gives him the incentive to develop, to be identified collectively in the brotherhood of Islam with the brothers in Islam; at the same time this also gives him the [incentive] . . . it has the psychological effect of giving him incentive as an individual. (p. 253)

This is what West (1994) says of Malcolm X:

Malcolm X was the prophet of black rage primarily because of his great love for black people. His love was neither abstract nor ephemeral. Rather, it was a concrete connection with a degraded and devalued people in need of psychic conversion. . . . Malcolm X
sharply crystallized the relation of black affirmation of self, black desire for freedom, black rage against American society, and the likelihood of early black death. (pp. 136, 137)

Rajiv (1992) argues that Malcolm X gave

his people a basis on which they could build up their identity on equal terms with the whites. Towards the end of Malcolm’s life the black men were no longer the recipients of concessions but could speak and demand human rights from a position of power. (p. 41)

She goes on to argue that Malcolm’s protests, “while expressing the need for a different identity also point out the inadequacy of the present system to provide the basis for such an identity” (p. 42). She concludes that Malcolm went “beyond the shores of white America to look for the basis for a new identity which will take into account the history of the Western World and the alternative being worked out by the new nations of the world” (p. 42).

Indeed, Africana critical theory is a staunch defender of freedom for and of all colored people, for as Malcolm said,

What happens to a black man in America today happens to the black man in Africa. What happens to a black man in America and Africa happens to the black man in Asia and to the man down in Latin America. (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 48)

Africana critical theory is perhaps one of the few philosophies that is concerned enough to demand that public policy be informed by the spirit of equity, social justice, and fairness to the group—a philosophy for human beings or personhood. Indeed, Malcolm argued in his autobiography that he had no respect for some of the Western philosophers because they spent most of their time arguing about things that were not really important. To Malcolm, then, philosophy should deal with problems affecting human beings in their existence as human beings—this is the whole essence of Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy. This is indeed in conformity with Africana critical theory’s common concern for the practical fruits of philosophy and philosophizing.
GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS, HOPELESSNESS, HELPlessness, OPPRESSION, AND EMPOWERMENT AS MAJOR THEMES IN AFRICANA CRITICAL THEORY

Group consciousness is a concept that Africana critical theorists share very faithfully. According to Rajiv (1992), “Black consciousness grew out of the unrelieved suffering and psychological traumas of a group of people who were subjected to overt and covert racism in the United States of America [and the world] for about four centuries” (p. 1). Rajiv defines consciousness as “a total configuration in any given individual which makes up his whole perception of reality, his whole world view” (p. 4). She goes on to define group consciousness as “a body of attitudes, sentiments and beliefs which serve to unify its members” (p. i). Indeed, “group consciousness . . . gives blacks an understanding of their predicament, of the social order of which they are a part and their place in relation to it which cannot be separated from their long history of suffering” (p. 31). She continues by arguing that “Black autobiographies are the richest and most revealing modes of black expression and the most appropriate vehicles for conveying the various facets of black consciousness” (p. 31). In this article, I will examine the extent to which Africana critical theorists have expounded Black consciousness in their autobiographies and in their various works.

However, it must be pointed out that apart from group consciousness, the works of Africana critical theorists are also replete with issues of helplessness, hopelessness, oppression, and persistent calls for empowerment because as a result of “the commonality of their experience, black (existential thinkers) enact the drama of the entire race rather than of an individual as one notices in white autobiographies” (Rajiv, 1992, p. ii). Indeed, Black existential thinkers ponder over the place of Blacks in the entire universe given Black people’s common experience in slavery and colonialism. “(They) show the movement from the consciousness of their predicament, an analysis of America’s racism to a way out of the existing race relations” (p. iii). For example, Richard Wright (1944/1993) in his autobiography, Black Boy, writes
The problem of living as a Negro was cold and hard. What was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady, seemingly so woven into the texture of things? What kind of life was possible under that hate? How had this hate come to be? Nothing about the problems of Negroes was ever taught in the classrooms at school; and whenever I would raise these questions with the boys, they would either remain silent or turn the subject into a joke. They were vocal about the petty individual wrongs they suffered, but they possessed no desire for a knowledge of the picture as a whole. (pp. 193-194)

Indeed, Wright confessed, “I was quickly learning the reality—a Negro’s reality—of the white world” (p. 174). And in American Hunger, he went on to ponder, “Could the Negro ever possess himself, learn to know what had happened to him in relation to the aspirations of Western Society? . . . [Could he] save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction?” (cited in Rajiv, 1992, p. iii). On his own part, Frederick Douglass (1845/1996) in his autobiography asked

Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence? These were the perplexing questions which began now to claim my thoughts, and to exercise the weak powers of my mind. . . . By some means I learned from these inquiries, That ‘God, up in the sky,’ made every body; and that he made white people to be masters and mistresses, and black people to be slaves. This did not satisfy me, nor lessen my interest in the subject. I was told, too, that God was good, and that He knew what was best for me, and best for everybody. This was less satisfactory than the first statement; because it came, point blank, against all my notions of goodness. . . . (How) did people know that God made black people to be slaves? (p. 178)

Indeed, Asante (1994), in a book chapter, stated,

Nothing in the Bible my father and mother kept on the small table alongside the wall of the front room could have prepared me for the shape, the deep grooves, of the hatred whites held for us by virtue of our color. (p. 131)
He went on to add, “Discrimination, prejudice, segregation, and the
document of white racial supremacy were neither innocuous nor
benign in those days; they were real legacies rooted in the great
enslavement of Africans” (p. 132). Similarly, Frantz Fanon (1963)
described the colonial world as

a world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manicheistic
world, a world of statues: the statue of the general who carried out
the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge; a world
which is sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed
by whips: this is the colonial world. (pp. 51-52)

Fanon went on to argue that the colonial world was a place where
the “native is a being hemmed in,” and concluded that “apartheid is
simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial
world” (p. 52). Indeed, Lewis Gordon (1997) asks what should be
done in a world where Blacks are consistently treated as inferiors
and hated by others. Frantz Fanon (1963) again talked of the
“Lived-Experience of the Black” in an anti-Black world. Dr. W. E.
B. Du Bois (1903/1989) described the problem of the 20th century
as “the problem of the color-line” (p. 1). Ralph Ellison (1947/1990)
wrote of Black invisibility. Toni Morrison raises the question of
Black identity in an anti-Black world. Cornell West believes in
keeping faith, and bell hooks/Glory Watkins ponders over Black
existence in a world predominantly hostile to Black humanity.
Malcolm X argued that African Americans were treated like numbers
with no meaning within the American experience. He maintained that
African Americans lived in a state of hopelessness, helplessness, dis-

crimination, violence, and cruelty. He argued convincingly that
Blacks in America lived under the yoke of slavery.

During the beginning of the 20th century, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois
(1903/1989) had criticized American society for creating “double-
consciousness” in African Americans and for causing African
Americans to look at themselves through the eyes of others or, as he
put it, for “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on
in amused contempt and pity” (p. 5). In an address during the 100th
anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Texas, Du Bois
recounted the numerous contributions of African Americans to the
social, economic, and technological development of the United States and called for “justice and freedom and understanding between men.” In an earlier debate in 1929, Du Bois urged Blacks not to accommodate White racism or accept second-class citizenship. He insisted that African Americans “must develop their own distinct and ‘superior’ culture within the context of the American social system while simultaneously fighting to eliminate ‘the color line’—the social, political, economic, and legal barrier of racial segregation” (Dunn, 1993, p. 28). In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* published in 1903, Du Bois (1903/1989) examined the veiled nature of African American life and African American invisibility within American society despite the immense contributions of African Americans to this society. This is his poignant pronouncement:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (p. 5)

Du Bois further lamented, “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 5)

He concluded that

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p. 5)
Here, Du Bois questions the “two-ness” of African Americans. That is, the effort to be a Black person with his or her humanity and at the same time to be subservient as demanded by racism in America. In his best-selling book titled *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*, Gregory Howard Williams (1995) “recounts his remarkable journey along the color line and illuminates the contrasts between the black and white worlds.” Williams describes the White world as one of opportunity, comfort, and privilege and the Black world as one of repression, struggle, deprivation, poverty, agonizing absurdities, and prejudice. Also, in his book *Notes of a Racial Caste Baby: Color Blindness and the End of Affirmative Action*, Byran K. Fair (1997) recalls that even as a child born in the 1960s, he spent most of the time he would have spent in reading, writing, and playing with other children worrying about hunger, cold, and thinking about what it meant to be Black in America. Indeed, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1989) lamented the birth of his son into American biracial society of unequal opportunities represented by prejudice, deprivation, repression, and struggle for Blacks. This is Du Bois’s heartfelt pronouncement:

Within the Veil was he born . . . and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro’s son. Holding in that little head—ah, bitterly!—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand—ah, wearily!—to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie. I saw the shadow of the Veil as it passed over my baby, I saw the cold city towering above the blood-red land. I held my face beside his little cheek, showed him the star-children and the twinkling lights as they began to flash, and stilled with an even-song the unvoiced terror of my life. (pp. 170-171)

Du Bois used the veil as a metaphor to show how Black people were seen or perceived in American society. That is to say, Black people were perceived not as human beings but were perceived and seen as nonhumans. Indeed, Du Bois published his book *The Souls of Black
Folk to “show the strange meaning of being black (in America)” at the beginning of the 20th century.

Archie Epps (1991) maintains that

The metaphor of the veil illustrated the hidden cover that encumbered the lives of Du Bois and other black men and women in America. The veil conveniently concealed from white Americans the rage and desperation that ate up the existence of black people in a racially divided country. (p. 5)

Carter G. Woodson (1933/1993) in his famous book, The Mis-Education of the Negro, argued that even the educational system in America had “created a split in the personality of African Americans typified by dual identities resulting in a profound identity crisis which has made educated African Americans” to “decry any such thing as race consciousness” (p. 7). He notes,

THE ‘educated Negroes’ have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African. (p. 1)

He went on to say, “The chief difficulty with the education of the Negro is that it has been largely imitation resulting in the enslavement of his mind” (p. 134). He continued by arguing that “Somebody outside of the race has desired to try out on Negroes some experiment which interested him and his coworkers; and Negroes, being objects of charity, have received them cordially and have done what they required” (p. 134). Indeed, the fate of Blacks in America was best illustrated in Ralph Ellison’s (1947/1990) best-selling book, Invisible Man. This is Ellison’s poignant description:

I am an invisible man... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)
Ellison used the metaphor of invisibility not because he could not be seen but because people refused to see him. Hence, he lamented, “It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.” He went on to say that his invisibility was due not to the peculiar condition of the eyes of those who refused to see him but due to the “construction of their inner eyes.” He exclaimed, “you often doubt if you really exist.” Ellison concluded,

> You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful. (p. 4)

African American invisibility was further attested to by Jean-Paul Sartre, the most renowned 20th-century existentialist. Based on what he saw after he had visited the United States in 1945, Sartre (1997) tells us that “In this country, deservedly proud of its democratic institutions, one man out of ten is deprived of his . . . rights; in this land of equality and liberty live 13 million untouchables” (p. 84). “These untouchables,” Sartre goes on to say, “you cross them in the streets at all hours of the day, but you do not return their stares.” He continued by stating that “if by chance their eyes meet yours, it seems to you that they do not see you and it is better for them and you that you pretend not to have noticed them” (p. 84). Sartre reminded us that these untouchables are not “all necessarily from the laboring class, yet the majority of them live in horrible misery; some are lawyers, doctors, professors, some manage major newspapers, . . . but they count as (little) as the elevator boy in the eyes of whites” (p. 84). Indeed, James Baldwin once said, “To be black in America is to be in rage all the time.” Similarly, Richard Wright raised the question “whether black men could live with dignity and without fear in a world dominated by white male power” given the racism against Black people in America and in the world (see
Hayes, 1997, p. 174). It is these horrible situations that Blacks are being forced to endure for being Black that has instigated critical, oppositional, and emancipatory thought or protest often described as Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy. According to Rabaka (2002), Africana critical theory is emancipatory thought that “may be utilized to critique domination and discrimination and provide a basis for theory and praxis in the interest of liberation” (p. 151). For example, Malcolm X (1971) maintained that America was a society that preached brotherhood on Sunday but did not practice it on any day of the week—a society that preaches brotherhood but practices violence against African Americans. In short, America’s practices were at odds with her humanistic pronouncements. To Malcolm, African Americans were trapped in exile in the ghettoes. He maintained,

If you are born in this country with black skin you are already in jail, you are already confined, you are already watched over by a warden who poses as your mayor and poses as your governor and poses as your President. He is nothing but your warden keeping you in confinement. (p. 114)

Malcolm wanted nothing less than the liberation of African Americans from the oppressive, White-dominated society. He believed that the old order must be completely destroyed and replaced with new political and economic realities that would enable Blacks and Whites to share power equally. Indeed, Malcolm X (1991) said, “My life was inseparably committed to the American black man’s struggle.” He lamented that the sun had set. “The black people today,” Malcolm argued,

are beginning to realize that it is a nightmare to us. What is a dream to you is a nightmare to us. What is hope to you has long since become hopeless to our people . . . in the ghetto, in the alley where the masses of our people live. (p. 93)
SUMMARY

From the above discussion, we can argue that Africana critical theory or Black existential philosophy is philosophy born of struggle and critical of domination in the lived experience of Africana peoples.

NOTE

1. In this article, the terms Africana critical theory and Black existential philosophy will be used interchangeably to refer to any discourse that raises questions of African and African American existence, being, and consciousness, and critiques domination.

REFERENCES


