Jacques Derrida in memorium
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It is tempting, in remembering Jacques Derrida's death on October 8, 2004, in Paris, to focus on the controversy surrounding the obituaries already written. Derrida was, after all, the theorist of text, and responding to the proliferation of texts at this moment seems almost too enticing to pass up. I can almost hear a playful reversal in the making, a deflection and deferral of both the critical and the fawning accounts of his life. And yet, I can also hear disappointment. He was the one, after all, who spoke against speaking too soon after a death, particularly the death of a friend, in case the academic impulse turned mourning into analysis:

What I thought impossible, indecent, and unjustifiable, what long ago and more or less secretly and resolutely I had promised myself never to do (out of a concern for rigor or fidelity, if you will, and because it is in this case too serious) was to write following the death, not after, not long after the death by returning to it, but just following the death, upon or on the occasion of the death, at the commemorative gatherings and tributes, in the writings "in memory" of those who while living would have been my friends, still present enough to me that some "declaration," indeed some analysis or "study," would seem at that moment completely unbearable. i

That many of those friends, and enemies, have spoken, is inevitable and understandable. ii More texts about Derrida's life, influence, and death are inevitable, especially for a philosopher who was so preoccupied with death in his later years. But even though I never knew him, it seems a bit odd writing about him at this time, in this place. It is as if his death can be used to make points, even if those points are only to establish his relevance within Africana philosophy.
So, in the context of *Philosophia Africana*, I think it would be useful to begin by reflecting on his birth for a moment, rather than his death.

It is well known that Jacques Derrida was born in Algeria, in 1930. Does this make him African? Does this fact of personal history in itself make him relevant to African philosophers? He never made much of his place of birth. And yet, his birth has come under some scrutiny by at least one prominent writer. Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* addresses the other trace, the more prominent one, that his thought lay at the border of Jewish and non-Jewish. Cixous looks back on “J's" Jewish roots, not to find some suppressed trace of theological commitment, but to engage in very Derridean wordplay that attempts to recover hints of the feminine, the informal (“Jackie”), and, of course, the Jewish/non-Jewish. Signifiers, as always, abound in complex and contradictory ways.

But I think Cixous's playful engagement has important implications for African philosophers, and suggests some reasons why we should note his life and his passing. For one, Derrida, like Africana philosophers, was always concerned about his "debts and duties". He recognized that everything that he did depended on those who had gone before. Second, Derrida, like Africana philosophers, was concerned about the mode of thought every bit as much as the content of thought. He recognized that philosophy could be found in play, in sorrow, in the traces of words that gave evidence of responsibility. Whether one finds the specifics of his disruptions useful or not, he walks the same path as those who want to question the received certainties of Western thought, and to open the door to multitudinous forms of expression as having philosophical force. And third, Derrida's work in the past ten or fifteen years showed a deep commitment to social justice, surprising to those who understood him to be a relativist or
nihilist. Such concerns are rarely far from the surface for Africana philosophers, either.

Cixous's work is significant for another reason - she takes a seemingly minor, rarely noted trace of his past, his Jewishness, and shows it to infuse his ways of thought. He spoke about his African birth even less than he spoke about his Jewishness, but it seems to me that his concern for debts and duties, his focus on modes of thought, and his recognition of the demands of social justice show him to walk a surprisingly similar path to Africana philosophy at its best.

If we turn to the question of death, though, we find someone who provides unexpected echoes of Africana thought. One example, from several we might choose: in a remembrance of Roland Barthes that feels very much like Boniface Abanuka's version of the significance of ancestors, Derrida says that

> When I say Roland Barthes it is certainly him whom I name, him beyond his name. But since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation ... it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in you, in us that I pass through his name.

His remembrance of Barthes, along with those of many others that he memorialized, speaks of responsibility to those who have gone before, a responsibility that remains significant without the guarantee of a metaphysics or functionalism. As with Abanuka, the real focus of Derrida's philosophy in this matter, rather than whether ancestors have metaphysical status or a socially cohesive function, is what matters to those who carry their memory.

Derrida's significance, and the reason that he will continue to be read (even by Africana philosophers), is that he views philosophy as a task, located in its activity, its moods and modes, rather than as the defence of a set of propositions. He ought to continue to be read by Africana philosophers, not as a resource for specific positions or arguments, but because his abiding
concern was what it means to live wisely and well. He exemplifies what I believe is also the best in Africana philosophy, which is to come up with the right question to ask, rather than the right proposition to defend. Whenever he engaged in wordplay, whenever he turned over language to find out what was left unsaid, he was really pressing us to ask new questions, about our responsible engagement with the world and with others. We as Africana philosophers need to see him as a partner in conversation and critical inquiry rather than as the representative of “deconstructionism” or “postmodernism” or some other set of theoretical preoccupations.

In the end, perhaps it does not matter whether we consider Derrida to be an Africana philosopher or not. It didn't matter to him, and it doesn't really matter to me either. What does matter is that the same unrelenting and playful inquiry, the same sense of truth (yes, I will use the word), and above all, the same sense of responsibility that animated and drove him is what I see in Africana philosophy as well.

ENDNOTES


