

# Bringing home knowledge for the public good:

Distinguished international scholar Professor Lewis Gordon will take up the prestigious Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship in the Department of Politics and International Relations.

The previous Nelson Mandela Visiting Professor was Amitav Acharya, professor of international relations and the Unesco Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance at the School of International



**Prof Lewis Gordon**

Service, American University, Washington, D.C.

The Nelson Mandela Visiting Professors teach a post-graduate course in each year of their appointment and give seminars and public lectures.

Lewis Gordon will be Visiting Professor for 2014 and 2015. Rhodos interviewed him about the appointment and his plans.

**Q: How do you feel about your appointment?**

**A:** I am honoured, while humbled by the task of doing justice to its namesake – especially during such a crossroads in his life and the country we both love.

This opportunity comes at a fortuitous period. My wife Jane Anna Gordon and I have joined the faculty of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, where we plan to participate in some important initiatives in the Center for Human Rights. We have posts in Philosophy, Political Science, and African American Studies, with affiliations in Judaic Studies and Caribbean and Latin American Studies.

Additionally, Jane has been elected President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association. It is our hope to contribute to several

worldwide initiatives on the discussion of the history of violence, poverty, enslavement, colonialism, and human rights.

Jane has already begun a dialogue with scholars in Senegal regarding linking up these projects with those in Europe, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. She plans, as well, to affirm her South African roots. She is the daughter of parents from Port Elizabeth and Cape Town and she plans to strengthen intellectual ties along these initiatives.

The Mandela Visiting Professorship will enable me to devote a substantial period to this stage of intellectual work in South Africa, which is, through sustained intellectual engagement for nearly two decades and also through marriage, where I consider my home in Africa.

An opportunity to bring such projects as Thinking Africa in dialogue with the many other projects in which I have been involved across the African continent and the rest of the globe (save Antarctica) is most felicitous. And in more precise intellectual terms, I have been thinking through questions of normative life beyond what have become prosaic conceptions of justice.

I will not only have much to offer students and colleagues in this regard in South Africa, but also so much to learn from them.

**Q: What does the Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship mean to you?**

**A:** The Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship, as I see it, is a national professorship. Its namesake embodies the spirit of the nation, its aspirations, its sense of character. That Mandela cannot – indeed, *could not* – be everything for the nation is a reminder of there being much to do, much to learn, much to figure out.

That is one of the principles of research and scholarship, and with the name of such a historic public figure behind it, it is also a reminder of the value of knowledge for the public good. These include inquiries into questions of justice, and the struggles emerging where justice is simply not enough in the global arena.

It is thus also a *world* professorship, since everyone understands the significance of Nelson Mandela. The namesake of this appointment exemplifies the important meeting of knowledge and courage in the form of action. It reminds us of the importance of public commitment and what it means to attempt to make human institutions humane.

**Q: What are your main themes that you will be teaching and when are you starting teaching at Rhodes?**

**A:** I have been meditating on problems of “unjust justice”, of what it means when systems of justice go wrong as we see in the rise of enslavement, poverty, racism, and other forms of human degradation in an age of many gains, supposedly in the spirit of advancing freedom.

I have been working on these ideas, with special attention to the intellectual offerings from what is known these days as the Global South, for my next book *No Longer Enslaved Yet Not Quite Free*. That project benefited much from my spirited engagements on African humanism and ubuntu at Rhodes last year.

I would like to explore these contradictions along the ongoing concerns of what it means to be human, what it means to be free, and what it means to offer critical reflection on such matters, especially in the realm of

# Q&A with Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship

political thought in terms of 21<sup>st</sup> century global challenges.

I hope to bring these considerations to national and international attention, not only through engagements with South African media but also international ones with which I am already involved such as *Truthout.org* and *historiesofviolence.com*. I will teach at Rhodes in September to mid-October 2014 and August to mid-September 2015, with visits in between.

**Q: Why did you accept the Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship?**

**A:** I accepted the Mandela Visiting Professorship for several reasons. The first is my unique relationship with South Africa. Many among the downtrodden have honoured me through engaging my ideas from the beginning of my career when I wrote *Bad Faith and Antiracism* straight through to such books as *Existential Africana* and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*.

I thank P. Mabogo More for that, especially with regard to his wisdom of having me speak at the Worker's College in Durban and his commentary over the years. The interest of his community of students, scholars, and activists (and subsequently others across the country) led to my visiting South Africa on many occasions, each of which was an experience of profound learning about what is proverbially greater than one's self.

These bonds have deepened over the years, as thought in South Africa extends so much beyond the country. There is no book I have written in which South Africa is not considered in the global struggle for a better world.

This brings me to the second reason.

Mandela has been an inspiration for considerations felt to this day. For better or for ill, it would be a grave error to say the name President Obama without remembering who preceded him in the South African example. And at the end of the day, I think Mandela understands that his name transcends him. It is an idea. It could be taken in good or bad directions.

To be called upon to represent it is an enormous responsibility – indeed, it is what I have characterised in my writings as a responsibility for responsibility itself: It is a call to do something, to attempt to make good on an obligation that exceeds oneself.

This brings me to the third consideration. I have a high regard for the important work being conducted by such scholars as Siphokazi Magadla, Sally Matthews, Leonhard Praeg, Richard Pithouse and Pedro Tabensky, especially round the Thinking Africa project, as well as the scholarship and administrative leadership of Vice-Chancellor Saleem Badat and Dean Fred Hendricks.

I have enjoyed learning much from the intellectual encounters I have had with this excellent group of scholars and welcome the opportunity for a

more sustained and intense engagement with them.

And finally, I think of those “invisible” South Africans.

Much of my work is about making visible that which is paradoxically invisible in plain sight. Whether as shack dwellers or “the poor,” or as those for whom the future seem to promise no voice, more substantial visits afford what Walter Rodney so astutely calls (paraphrased) grounding with my sisters and brothers.

**Q: In your past interactions with Rhodes politics students, how do you compare them with your own students from your institution?**

**A:** I have taught students at Yale University, Purdue University, Brown University, The Federal University in Brazil, Temple University, the University of the West Indies, University of Paris, Toulouse University, and now the University of Connecticut.

The students I have met at Rhodes over the years, especially those in the seminar on humanism I conducted last summer, stand among the very best of the various cohorts I have taught over the years.

I appreciate not only their intelligence and wit but also their humanity, their ethical spirit. As we know, South Africa is a country in which whom you meet entirely depends on who invites you. There are still whites-only spaces, although not officially so.

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What I love about the students I met at Rhodes is how many of them have challenged and transcended those divisions without self-righteousness but instead through sheer commitment.

I should like to add that I also have a high regard for the students from other universities, such as Sabelo Mcinziba in Cape Town or those from Johannesburg, who at times hitchhiked across the country to attend my lectures.

Their hunger for knowledge is always nothing short of inspiring.

**Q: Is there anything you want to add?**

**A:** A friend, whom I consider to be one of South Africa's underappreciated treasures, is P. Mabogo More. He is a courageous man who never failed to think about the power knowledge offers his students. I consider this appointment a part of his legacy, although he is not a faculty member at Rhodes and played no role in the selection process.

And then there are the many communities of activist scholars I have known over the years such as Drucilla Cornell, Rozena Maart, and Andile Mngxitama, who have taken unpopular stands on questions of gender, race, and sexuality.

I consider this, too, to be part of their legacy. And finally, there are my in-laws, Jean and John Comaroff, both of whom are South African. That makes my wife and children also of South African ancestry. I regard myself as a meeting of many worlds. This distinguished visiting professorship in South Africa is thus for me not only professional and political but also profoundly personal.