



A Philosophical Account of Africana Studies

An Interview with Lewis Gordon

Linda Martín Alcoff

Lewis Gordon received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale University in 1993, then taught in the philosophy department at Purdue until 1996. The following year, he moved to Brown University, where he is now chair of the Department of Africana Studies. He has had an equally significant and original impact in both domains. In Africana studies, Gordon has pursued an expansive concept of black identity that includes not only the United States and Canada, but Latin America and the multilingual Caribbean as well. In philosophy, he has resuscitated the tradition of existentialism, which was previously on the wane after the onslaught of antihumanism, poststructuralism, and other attacks on the theory of subjectivity that is the cornerstone of existentialism. For Gordon, existentialism is a vital tool in the project of developing a new humanities and new social theory, ones that can interrogate their Eurocentrism and base themselves more fully on the experiences of diverse peoples. Moreover, he argues that existentialism is critical for the development of African-American thought as well as for an analysis of racism in everyday life. He has developed these arguments in four books, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995), *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995), *Her Majesty's Other Children* (1997), and *Existencia Africana* (2000).

Gordon has thus led a movement toward a reconfigured existential phenomenology among black philosophers; in addition to the books just listed, he has edited four anthologies that collect the developing body of work in this new genre of black existentialism. Building on Frantz Fanon here, Gordon's project has been the development of new phenomenological

accounts of embodied black existence. His phenomenology therefore does not assume that anybody's lived experience can stand in for the whole. As feminists have called for, it recognizes that only a multitude of accounts can reveal the complex of cultural meanings distributed through differentially marked bodies. Gordon's work shows us by example how existential phenomenology can be reformed of its narrowness (European male perspective) and how it can continue to provide a powerful theoretical framework within which we can address social issues.

Gordon's timely intervention helps to correct problems in both postmodernist treatments and individualist moral philosophy. Postmodernist analysis often limits itself to the level of cultural representation, never seeming to get to the level of human action. An enormous amount of postmodern work ostensibly about "the body" never addresses actually existing bodies. Individualist moral philosophy often seems to operate in a universe where it is assumed that complex reasoning can be used to determine an individual's choices of action without interference from economic forces or cultural pressure, and where the goal is always assumed to be achieving gender and color "blindness." Gordon's account provides a useful alternative to these approaches, a phenomenological indictment of racism's effects as well as its assumptions.

In this interview, Gordon explains how his philosophical work has informed his development of Africana studies, how he envisions the relationship between Africana and Latin American studies, the errors he detects in some of the existing work in both these areas, and the role of philosophy developed from the "margins."

—L. M. A.

Linda Martín Alcoff: *What is your view of the relationship between Africana studies, on the one hand, and Latin American studies and Latino studies, on the other? These departments do not always have good relationships in this country, with frequent tensions over questions of territory. I know you've thought about this and addressed it both institutionally and theoretically.*

Lewis Gordon: Well, the first thing I'd like to say is that I'm delighted you're here because I dig your work as a philosopher and in addition to that these are issues we have been talking about over the years. In terms of the relationship of Africana studies to Latin American studies, these issues are connected to the forms of attacks that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. If you look at the early programs in the late 1960s and early

1970s, many of them were actually cohesive. At Lehman College at the City University of New York, for example, you could find black studies and Puerto Rican studies, often with the same faculty. This makes sense to me. The immediate reason why separations have occurred is connected to a technique used by the Right against communities of color. Ultimately what the Right would like to do is not only pit Latinos against African Americans but also try, even among people of African descent, to pit immigrants of African descent against U.S.-born people of African descent.

This is connected to a form of politics that really limits what kind of resources we can have. The tendency is to set up a situation in such a way that homogeneity prevails. Somehow if you can deal with a monolithic group, if you are among your own kind, if you can deal with similarities, somehow things are supposed to work better not only in terms of sociological identification but also in real progress on resources. In other words, one could say, “This is what Latinos get,” “This is what African Americans get,” “This is what Asian Americans get,” and so on. But this approach is based on a social and philosophical mistake. The first mistake I would say is just straightforwardly social and historical. If we are going to talk about the history of conquest in the Americas, we’re going to have to start with Portugal and Spain. That’s just a basic premise here. And then if you’re going to move to subsequent levels, you have to go through France and through to the British. Now, during the conquest, from the very moment these individuals landed on American shores, they did not simply say, “Well, here we are and there you are.” The truth of the matter is that in the midst of the conquest there was a great degree of mixture going on. So the fact of the matter is that, on a basic level, “racial mixing” has been a founding premise of the American experience. The anxiety over mixture began to emerge as the connection between racism and the political economy was such that it became important to control ultimately not only the behavior of offspring but also the behavior of women. This is something we know particularly from slavery, but we also see it in different manifestations in the Americas before slavery.

But even with all of this going on there is a tendency for us to look at questions of mixture on the level of culture, or what is called today creolization, more in terms of the Latin American areas of the Americas, and to look at the Anglo areas as if they are pure and homogeneous. But that’s an utter falsehood. As we know, it’s not only a matter of how far Mexico extended into North America historically, but also if you were to look through the complexity of French-speaking regions in the North moving

downward, the fact is that communities were always moving through and migrating. Even if you look at the Caribbean islands there are different periods in which not only different colonizing powers, but also different indigenous groups from different parts of the Americas occupied the islands. So even if you were to talk about a native population in, for example, Jamaica, you would be talking about different periods, from the Arawak, to the Carib, to the Taino, to communities that also came from South America.

Now, when you put all of that together, there is no way that there was a case of simple amnesia. There are traces of these communities all over the place, and one of the things that an excellent student of mine, Claudia Milian (2001), points out very persuasively is that there's an error if we look at the question of race in North America purely in, for example, double consciousness terms. There are clearly many manifestations of borders that recur through the North American and the South American landscapes. Similarly, double consciousness occurs through these landscapes as well. But a danger emerges when, in order to chart out a theoretical terrain, borderlands become the Latin American trope and double consciousness becomes the African American trope, although in every instance in which one looks at African America, one sees dynamics of borderlands. What are some of these examples? If you go and look at a typical nineteenth-century African American novel, there's always a character who is Latino. We use the term *Latino* today, but let's project it onto the past for the moment. There's a character who raises the question of how one moves through U.S. society. And it's almost always a Latin American character. When we talk about the Schomburg Library for instance, it is founded by an African Puerto Rican. When we look through *Diary of an Ex-Colored Man*, we see that, at the time of Jim Crow, one of the tropes in African American society was, if you want to get away from segregation for a moment, you say you're a Cuban or you say you're from another part of Latin America. Outside of that I think it's more than the question of calling in a false identity. The communities were such that you'd find periods where there were African Americans who were intimately connected to Chicano communities, to Cuban communities, to Puerto Rican communities. We see this today on a cultural level in rap.

LMA: *And your own middle name is Ricardo.*

LG: Right, my middle name is Ricardo and I am named after a Cuban: my great-grandmother's lover, before she met my great-grandfather. It's a

funny story. All these years I had the name Ricardo, and my grandmother told me one day that my great-grandmother was on the docks waiting to meet her Cuban man, Ricardo, to go to Cuba, and he stood her up. And my great-grandfather, seeing this woman there, talked to her and walked her home. But I guess you know she didn't forget this guy, because her first great-grandson is named Ricardo! In the island of Jamaica, where I was born, there's also Spanish Town. You can see the influences of Spain on the landscape. And there are a lot of things that Puerto Ricans think are connected to the Latin American experience that you find on the Anglo islands in the Caribbean, often in regard to food.

So it strikes me that the project of homogeneity creates a false construction of these New World communities and that if we begin to reexamine them we'll find a whole lot of things that may surprise us. "Apache," the rock Latin tune where early rap music appeared, has a conga drum and all of these things going on, and this was the reality in the Bronx when I was there in the early 1970s. When we went out to have street parties or dances in the parks or whatever, there wasn't a very neat divide between things black and things Latino, but there was a mixture of them. If you go out to many Caribbean parties, even if they define themselves as Anglo-Caribbean, you can play reggae, dance hall, calypso, salsa, merengue, the whole range, and people will dance because it's part of their cultural heritage. You can pick any Caribbean island and just look at the food and you'll find a lot of connections there.

Some people say, "Yeah, but what about the African American?" What we fail to realize, however, is that the African America we tend to study today is based on a lot of fiction by my colleagues in the academy. I'll give you an example. I spoke with a colleague the other day who told me that when he was at Howard University, Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates Jr. came to speak, and this colleague, a professor at Howard at the time, raised his hand and said, "You know, there are millions of black people in the Americas and in North America who do not meet the description of a black person you hold." And at that point West and Gates said, well, they had to admit a certain ignorance. Now we have to think about this. We have two eminent scholars projected as the leading authorities on black people and they don't know black people. And the reason they don't know black people is because they look at black people in terms of a fiction of the romantic narrative of the Civil Rights movement, of a purely black Baptist community that migrated from the South and that for the most part is linked either to the industrial working class or the

teaching sector of the service economy. But that was never the whole reality of black people in America. The truth of the matter is that, even in the period of migration, there were always Caribbeans in Harlem; there were always Latinos in Harlem; they were always working together in a way that had a lot of cross-fertilization. We have to remember that Malcolm X's mother was Antiguan. We have to remember why Marcus Garvey was able to be as influential as he was. He wasn't just an outsider coming in to talk to U.S. black people; there were a lot of people in the United States who were also from these diasporic communities. In addition to that, look at the religious backgrounds: the large numbers of black Catholics, the black Jewish communities in the Caribbean and in the United States (there was a wonderful early study by Howard Brotz on the black Jews of the Caribbean), and many others. Then we have to think about the black Muslim community; the fact is that an estimated 30 percent of the slaves that came over were Muslim. When we begin to realize this we see that these narratives look at the African American community too simplistically.

LMA: *It seems that one of the ways some people have suggested we address this problem and go beyond where West and Gates look is with the concept of cultural Pan-Africanism; and some Africana studies departments are organized according to that frame. But though this has some real advantages, some argue it produces a kind of division once again between the non-African Latino populations in the Caribbean and elsewhere, on the one hand, and the African Caribbean populations, on the other. What do you think of Pan-Africanism as a solution to the problem that you are raising of the heterogeneity of African diasporic people?*

LG: I don't think Pan-Africanism is a solution to that problem. I think Pan-Africanism was needed to address impending genocide. The fact of the matter is that in the nineteenth century the European nations were carving up Africa to do to its indigenous populations what they did to the indigenous populations of North America; and as we know the indigenous populations of North America were reduced to 4 percent of their former numbers. The level of carnage, disease, and poverty that hit the African continent in the twentieth century made this effort nearly successful. I think that is what Pan-Africanism as a rallying cry is about: trying to ensure that a group of people are not wiped off the face of the earth.

The points I made earlier about the study of African Americans apply as well to the study of Latin Americans, in which there is quite often a tendency to write out the African element in Latin America. There are

many who'd be proud of the European and indigenous American influences, and then they'll say, "Well, there's a little bit of Africa there." But there are some studies that show that during the Mexican inquisition 80 percent of those killed were African, so for something that was not significant there seems to be a lot of obsession over it. We already know that in Latin America, in spite of all the emphasis on *mestizaje*, there are different expectations for people in the political economy according to their skin tone. So there are lots of issues in Latin America that need to be addressed and that unfortunately aren't being addressed. It is similar to the problem in African American studies, where some of our colleagues are misrepresenting the communities, and, in some cases, this is deliberate. We are in a period where, unfortunately, race representatives can make things up.

Here at Brown we take the position that the African diaspora looked at in an isolated, singular way is a fallacy. We have to recognize that wherever people go, they mix in with the communities that are local, and in that mixture they create new cultural formations. So for us, if you are going to look at the African diaspora in the Americas it means you have to look at its intersection with Native America, Latin America, Europe, and the complexities that connect through Asia. That is why we have courses on African Native America. That's why seven out of our thirteen faculty members are also professors of Latin American studies. We have the largest contingent of scholars who are looking not only at blacks in Latin America, but at the complexity of race in Latin America. And when we look at Latin America, we look at it not only in terms of Spanish-speaking groups, but Portuguese-speaking and French-speaking as well. We also try to have a dialogue on the complexity of our other language formations; for instance, where Dutch is spoken in parts of the Caribbean, or the complexity of what is happening now as the Asian population grows; and although the predominant mixture tends to be between Asian and white, there are also growing communities of Afro-Asians. And it is not just a matter of racial designation: there is no way that, for instance, Asian businesses in black communities exist there in a purely isolated Asian way. It is clear, for instance, that if you go into New York City and you look at Korean stores, they sell a lot of Jamaican goods. In other words, a knowledge is emerging that is going to create new cultural formations. We recognize that.

The other thing we try to recognize is that you cannot study these formations in terms of a singular episteme or a singular disciplinary trope. So we do not say we are going to look at it through cultural studies or literature or philosophy or whatever. We start with the question of theoretical,

historical (in terms not of the field of history, but of a historical understanding), and artistic approaches to the study of the African diaspora, and we try to recruit faculty who work through a minimum of two of these matrices. So that means that one can have a historical or theoretical approach to the African formation creolized through North America and Latin America or be an artist who is historically formed or theoretically formed. These are the ways we need to work in order to ask the right questions, because the reality is that colonization, conquest, and racism obscure a lot of our vision. To be trained as an historian or a philosopher and simply apply it to the study of people of color leads to fundamental problems because this entails a failure to make apparent the way in which those people have been problematized. So what happens is, quite often, we look for a symmetry between white people and communities of color without asking ourselves whether there is a fundamental asymmetry that may change the questions.

But one of the things we are discovering through this way of doing research is that we need to change our understanding of how we look at white people. "White" people have been designated as a category of purity, but once we begin to undermine our notion of purity, we see something that many whites do not see. Many whites already start with the premise that as long as they are with another white person they are not dealing with mixture, but as we know most whites in America marry whites outside of their group in some capacity, Italian-Irish, German-Italian, whatever it may be. And in the midst of this, there are these hidden communities of color, whether that be through name changes or whatever else. We don't realize in the U.S. context that we do not really function in the same way that much of the rest of the world functions on the question of marital mixing.

I'll give you an example. I was teaching a class this semester where this issue was raised and I just asked each student to describe their background. Of course, they said that "I'm just from white people." Or another person would say that "I'm just from black people." Well, the blacks were interesting. The black students would say, "Well, my great grandmother's Irish, my other cousin is from Puerto Rico," showing of course again that mixture is more apparent with black communities. Similarly, the Latino students in class would say, "Yeah, I have a black cousin here and an Italian cousin there," and so forth. But then we need to ask two questions. First of all, if all the communities of color have white relatives, why did the white students in their description of their identity cease to have that? Why is it that at a black family reunion or a Latino family reunion, all of these shades come in, including the white ones, but that at the white ones none of

these people exist? Now, just the logic of numbers, just basic mathematical principles, would let you know that somebody's keeping some people out of the reunion.

But something else happened that was interesting. There was an Indian student who was from a particular sect in Hinduism that forbids marriage outside of that community to the point where they had to break a lot of incest rules just to be married. And what she was pointing out that the Americans in the room didn't realize is that in a lot of other parts of the world people do not marry out of their groups and that what the whites were describing as intragroup marriage, for her, was not intra- at all. She said, "What are you talking about? A Catholic married to a Jew or a Catholic to a Protestant?" For her, it was just crazy to think that she would marry somebody not in her religious sect. Absolutely crazy. So already there are complicated issues with respect to how we look at Americans, period. The fact is that as Americanism begins to globalize, it is affecting marriage and relations in other parts of the world. There is a contradiction because as it globalizes it leads to de facto mixture, but on the de jure level, on the level of so-called policy, it is still functioning according to a theory of homogeneity.

LMA: *I'd like to ask you about the applicability of your account of antiblack racism to Latin America. The illusion of purity is not as well maintained in Latin America as it is in North America, but there is still a color hierarchy and there are still families that will deny or try to keep in their closets darker relatives, just as you were describing. Until recently many people, even some academics, accepted the myth that Latin America was a land without racism, but that myth is being exposed by the last ten years of scholarship. And there are interesting differences in the way race and racism work in the South versus the North. In your first book, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, you give an account of antiblack racism that is very central to the formation of *mestizaje*, which was in many cases a deliberate attempt to identify the essential Latin American identity without blackness. What do you think about the applicability of your analysis beyond the borders of the United States?*

LG: Since I was born beyond the borders of the United States, it is funny how some critics of my work project their anxieties onto me. So, for instance, there was one critic in England who kept trying to say, "Well, that is your U.S. view," having no idea that, not only was I born in Jamaica, but I was living in a world where there was complex movement between Cuba and

Jamaica, since a third of Cubans are Jamaican immigrants. I have a lot of relatives in Cuba and my case is even more complicated because I am descended from Jews as well and a lot of my Jewish relatives are the ones in Cuba. I also went through the Bahamas. In New York City, if you grow up in the South Bronx you grow up pretty much speaking Spanglish. So there is this reality that I was writing from, experientially, that was already rooted in Latin America because I don't look at the Caribbean in a purely Anglo way.

But the second thing is this: my first book was meant to address a particular problem. I was addressing the failure in race theory to deal with the problem of metastability of consciousness and the problem of bad faith. Some took my position to be that racism is *only* a form of bad faith, but that's not what I was arguing. I was trying to look at the bad faith dimensions of racism. As we know, there are two classical, and fallacious, views about how to understand race. One is a purely structuralist model: race is only about institutions and structures. It has nothing to do with your individual disposition. And for people who believe there is racism without responsibility, that's ideal, because then it is the structures and you don't have to deal with individual relationships. The problem with this view is that the structures are not what's at issue. You can establish demographically how structures affect aspects of social life: how many people have what resources, what are their odds/probabilities, and those things. But most people don't live primarily in terms of those structures. Most people live in terms of meeting friends on the street. People have experiences of betrayal, desire, the whole range of experiences. And that's why the people who tend to go to the other extreme view, the purely subjectivist-psychological models, are able to speak to that reality. The fact is that, for instance, a black person may meet two white people. One may hate black people and the other one may not. So how do you deal with those phenomena?

The problem with the purely psychological model is that it lets the structures off the hook. There are structures that impact people's lives. So we need a philosophical theory that mediates the individual's relation to the structures. I like the existential/phenomenological distinction between a purely psychological view of consciousness and a view of consciousness in terms of dealing with meaningful phenomena. In this way we can apprehend or understand reality in meaningful terms. What metastability means is this: every effort to render consciousness, experience, or the human being complete finds itself facing its own incompleteness. The simple version of

this is if you tell a person you can predict everything he or she is going to do, the person will say, “Yeah, well, I’ll change my mind.” This is one of the ways in which metastability works, but the philosophical grounding of it is an understanding of a fundamental incompleteness at the heart of what a human being is. Most forms of racism, for instance, try to deal with a fully defined set of people. But if we take the position that a human being tends to be a more open reality, that there is not a complete definition, then we begin to notice something about how racism works, that racism tends to ascribe a sort of completeness to a fundamentally incomplete reality. Put in another language, the human being is such that every effort to create a lawlike generalization of the human being finds itself at the point of the limit of its ability to function as a law.

I know that is very abstract. I can put it into another form. The discussion of bad faith and antiblack racism was meant to address several tropes in the study of race and time and that continuum. In other words, the error is to think that one can have a single complete theory of racism, but what I was trying to show is that you need a multitude of theories working together because we are straining our disciplinary categories. This reflects back on the way I have described Africana studies. So here’s an example. If we go back to the structured individualist model, there are two models of structure that dominated race theory at the time I wrote the book and that continue pretty much to this today, although the conservatives have been attacking these quite a bit.

The first one, of course, is the materialist political economy argument, which has a rich history in terms of Marxism. But the problem with that view is that it does not address racism on its own terms. It wants to find a category to which it can subordinate the study of racism. As we know, the project was to show that racism was a subspecies of class exploitation. But then there was another model, the poststructuralist one, which tried to look at the question in terms of a semiotic move. The problem with the semiotic move is that it has a tendency to collapse racism into what I call the relational theory of race. The relational theory of race has two structures. One could be semantic, in other words, what is the term *white*, the term *black*, or the term *Asian American*? A sort of term analysis. But there was another, more syntactical model, more of an examination of the grammar of race. It offers a way of looking at how racial semantic terms are produced while holding back the question of what those terms will actually be or say. So this view is a more formalistic conception of race that functions almost like the propositional calculus.

I had some fun in one of my articles by writing a propositional calculus of race and racism. If you look at this essay, “Sex, Race, and Matrices of Desire” (Gordon 1997), it is a calculus. The thing about the calculus view, linked to the question of syntax, is that it makes a contribution by showing that, although different individuals may look different over time, they will still tend to occupy similar racial categories. So start with a basic rule in the grammar, such as that the objective is to not be like whoever represents the bottom. Notice that you don’t have to say what the bottom looks like. But even without concretely, phenomenologically, or even phenomenologically defining who that bottom is, the point is that whoever it is will be ascribed the term *black*. But this is not literally the color black, because this phenomenon’s defining feature is the behavior of distancing oneself from the bottom (as a consequence, from the purely semiotic relational view, there could be people today we would consider “white” occupying the category called “black”). Now, we would call those defined as the most distant from the bottom “white,” but again, by seeing this as a grammar, we can see that who these people are is constantly shifting. As long as they occupy the farthest distance, they will be the “whites.” Again, there is no rule saying that these “whites” will look like the people that today we call the “whites.”

LMA: *So you find the semiotic analysis useful?*

LG: I think it does address an important problem, which is how racial identities change over historical time. It explains why, for instance, people in Africa, in say 400 B.C.E., would have no reason, if they were functioning according to this grammar, to think of themselves as “white” or “black.” It explains why there are people who may be very light but who thought of themselves as dark. That at least explains the grammar of race categories, not the concrete question of who will occupy them, or how they would look. But at least we know there is a certain relational thing at work. The problem with this account, of course, is that it is purely formal. It cannot work without the sufficiency of history. So a necessary condition of all racial formations and racist realities is that there are people who will function differently in relation to others. In other words, you really do not know what race you are until people who are not your race appear. You never have any reason to think of your own race as racialized, and that is why Fanon, for instance, points out that as long as blacks remain ultimately among blacks they have no reason to think of themselves other than as

human beings. As long as whites remain purely among whites they have no reason to think of themselves other than as human beings. But when there is a grammar that is already setting up the differentiation, the levels of differentiation from others, that is when we begin to get these categories.

But now comes something tricky and this is why I wanted to look at the question of bad faith. The tricky thing is that people never simply occupy these relations. Something happens to people to make them see things, on the basis of how these grammars are introduced, that are not ordinarily what they see. So we know, for instance, if a person who today looks white is defined as black, something happens. It is not as if people just begin to look and say, "Well, the person simply looks 'white.'" A process of trying to find the blackness of and in the person begins. And in the process, certain things happen to the way people see the social world. Now, there are other issues that begin to emerge, for instance, with racism, because racism is not simply the activity of seeing races. It is also the activity of making us believe things that we may not fully believe. For instance, racists may believe that it is impossible for reproduction to occur between their race and a member of the hated race. They convince themselves that the difference is on a level of different species. But as we know, all the evidence around us in the social world shows this to be false. In other words, there is so much evidence against *racist* beliefs that the only way racist beliefs can really persist is through people believing what they do not believe. So it becomes paradoxical. And there are lots of instances of this. Here is another one: I have argued that once you look at this relational view, although racism is still a de facto self-other relation by virtue of being a relation between one human being and another, it is an internal practice (that can operate entirely within an individual mind) and not an actual self-other relation. It is a practice in which a world of selves and others exists, in addition to a world of selves and nonothers, nonselves. In other words, racism is convincing ourselves that beings that manifest all the features of otherness, the ethical features of otherness, are not even others. They are below that spectrum.

LMA: *Is this the idea of invisibleness and anonymity that you write about?*

LG: Invisibleness and anonymity connect more to the epistemic features of this, whereas what I've been discussing connects to the sort of false ontological judgment that is made. In other words, racists say, "Those are not really people," but the problem is they are. And in many ways

the complex socialization that determines how we spot people makes the activity to maintain other people as nonpeople collapse into bad faith. But here is the other point. You notice that the narrative I just laid out had a semiotic feature, a historical feature, a feature that connects to epistemology, a feature that also connects to the dynamism of material conditions. It also has a strong position on agency, which is that people have to interact in a social world that puts them into a situation of having to make decisions. So when we put all of this together we get to another level, the one I was trying to look at in *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*. Given that complex network of issues, there is another issue we have to deal with: the metastructures of racist analysis. In other words, there is a racist form of theorizing. So that is why in the preface I said that the theorist has to question the process of articulating theory.

LMA: *What is the racist form of theorizing?*

LG: Well, one racist form of theorizing was pointed out by W. E. B. DuBois. The very beginning of the question, he said, already makes the people in question into a problem. So it automatically renders their existence illegitimate in the process of human legitimating practices. So, for instance, if one is going to go study, say, a group of working-class white women, then one is going to raise a question of what is it like to be in a situation where the economic options are limited. And then one would begin to say, "Well, it means for them that the economic differentials between a teenager and an adult are very small," which means that there is no incentive to wait to start having children. But when the same study looks at working-class communities of color, causal explanations are never given in terms of poverty; rather, causal explanations based on race emerge, and as a consequence there is a very different discourse about these women, which often sees them as pathological. The history of this problem goes all the way back to the nineteenth century. If you look at some of the observations about slave plantations in, for example, Herbert Goodman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, you notice that some Northerners were commenting on the promiscuity of the young slave women as if they had an option. What is also interesting is that they were condemning the sexual mores of the slave community in general for taking in and protecting these women, when in fact this was a very humane response that recognized the women's situation.

If you notice, throughout my work, my argument is not only about the creolization of cultures, and the complexity of mixture, but also about

the complexity of methodological and identity assumptions. So gender has always informed my work, not as an add-on. What I argue is that because the human being is metastable, the human being shifts. Different identity formations manifest themselves in the lives of human beings on a daily basis. Now, that means that a fallacy emerges if one simply treats race as a floating category of analysis. Since I have taken the position that consciousness is fundamentally embodied, then it makes a big difference if one's embodiment is male or female. This also points to another form of bad faith in the study of human beings, in which we try to study the human being as disembodied. Or we study the human being's embodiment as on the level of a thing. In other words, if we take the fluidity and the complexity and the conditions for meaning of the human body out of the human body, then we have a fallacious form of human study.

So what we need to deal with in the study of race and racism is the complexity of what it means to be an embodied reality that is able to be the producer of symbols, the producer of history, and also the source of not only anxiety but also of suffering. One of the things that is often missing when we look at racism, not race, is that racism is a category of oppression, and the interesting thing about oppression is that it tends to take on very interesting phenomenological features. Let's not say what type of oppression it is; let's just talk about oppression in general. Oppression limits the options one has to affect humanity, and the more limited the options are the more one begins to exercise one's humanity through a creative implosive reference of choices. In other words, if your options are very severely limited, as in the case of, say, a prisoner in a straitjacket, you can become so internal in your discursive practices that all you can do is live inside your mind. Oppression always pushes people toward inward evaluation. They are constantly examining, testing themselves, questioning themselves: "Am I good enough?" "Am I right?" "Is there something wrong with me?" It happens all the time. Whereas, in a situation where oppression isn't the guiding feature, thought and choices become more outward-directed. One becomes internal in relation to something external, but the something external doesn't function as a boundary. So that is one of the reasons, for instance, that Fanon focused on the problem of oppression in the quest for actional activity, or the ability to move outward rather than simply to be always introspective. Now, of course, someone may raise the question of the neurotic; in other words, what happens when the highly privileged individual has lots of options but is constantly inwardly obsessed? But the neurotic is *neurotic*: in other words, it would be an error to use

mental illness, or some form of mental pathology, as the guiding principle for conditions of normality. And what Fanon points out is that one feature of oppression is that it sets an abnormal condition for normality of oppressed individuals.

LMA: *So one of the effects of oppression is an increased inward focus?*

LG: A constant questioning of the legitimacy of the self. You can always spot an oppressed community because the moment they get together by themselves they constantly talk about what is wrong with them. Always. There is always something wrong. The best example, of course, is if you think about African Americans, they are always talking about what they call “niggers.” But not only African Americans do this, just go to the Caribbean, and you will find the same thing. You go to parts of Latin America, same thing. And that is the sign that oppression exists. It is a constant inward deprecation of self, which ultimately begins with the idea of the self as an unjustified, problematic being that should not be in the world.

LMA: *How does this problem relate to the European crisis of self, the crisis that Husserl talks about, that Heidegger talks about, that the French poststructuralists all talk about? In your work you have related this crisis to colonialism and to Europe’s—or Anglo-European (i.e., U.S. and European) society’s—relationship with other societies outside of it. And you have suggested that this crisis is actually very much related to Eurocentrism.*

LG: There are two things about crisis. One of the things I have pointed out is that all crises are ultimately forms of bad faith. But I don’t mean like an individual in bad faith. What crises do is to take humanly created phenomena and treat them as naturalized impositions on the human world. So it is literally a human society lying to itself about the source of its problems. So, of course, we can talk about the crisis of food in the world, but we are throwing away food while people are starving to death. We talk about the energy crisis, but in many cases we have a political economy that limits our access to resources for the sake of profit. There are many ways we can develop alternative energy sites. If you pick almost any humanly generated problem, there is a human solution to it. So we tend to conceal from ourselves the source of the solution. For instance, if we look at the way we talk about women’s pursuit of careers in relation to their having children, the fact of the matter is that we have set it up to be costly for any

woman to have children. It shouldn't be career *or* children. We can set up a system in which people can do both. So the first thing I look at in relation to crises is that they are created by human beings.

For me, European crises, as Heidegger and others have formulated them, are really connected to another problem that I also root in bad faith, and that is narcissism. What narcissism is about is seeking the image of oneself that one would prefer, but the image of oneself that one would prefer is often a defective image. A quintessential example of this is the story of Snow White. The stepmother wants the mirror to tell her that she is beautiful, as if that is really going to mean that she is beautiful. Now, in many ways this is a point that Fanon also argued. Fanon argued that Europe is narcissistic at the period of the ascendance of bourgeois civilization. But there is a certain point in the legitimation of that emergence in relation to rationalization and culture, philosophy, in which they began to try and create a conception of Man that was already self-deceptive. So at the heart of that project was already the narcissistic moment that created levels of deception that not only led to, on the epistemic level, colonization of the rest of the world (because there was already colonization on the material level), but an internal rationalization of the self that also created a self-imposed colonization. So what we find is a desire for a false reality. This has permeated Western philosophy, where, in many instances, it is so obvious that it is not referring to the universal. And you can see the way philosophers wriggle and struggle through it by trying to create fictional versions of the people who are met elsewhere. You find it in Hobbes. You find it in Hume. You find it in Kant. And it is more than a question of being hypocritical. I think it is better understood as a problem of narcissism.

The problem that arises, of course, is that an epistemological opportunity cost emerges. So many resources are needed to maintain that narcissism that it begins to collapse into itself. Here is an example. Think of mainstream philosophy in the United States: if you compare the amount of economic resources, the amount of support and ideological energy put into its maintenance, with the low quality of what it produces—you see that it is already facing its own internal decadence. Whereas in the heyday of the ascent of this kind of philosophy very few resources went a long way, produced works of genius, produced ideas that were creating a conception of the North American and the Northern European self that occasioned some envy; but when a genius produces a falsehood, it is an aesthetically interesting falsehood. So there are many of us today who can read the writings of Hegel or Schopenhauer and so forth and we may not take their philosophy

of the human to be true but we can appreciate the level of aesthetic genius in the practice of trying to understand it. We could look at the poetry of Byron, Shelley, or even at U.S. literature, at Faulkner and others; we could look at Bertrand Russell's effort in the various stages of his career to found mathematics and to create a philosophy of mind. We can appreciate all of this. But once philosophy begins to deal with this issue of decay it has to deal with its particularity. One of the things that was not entertained or taken very seriously during the ascent of bourgeois Western civilization was its particularity. Today, although it has achieved global status, the truth is that the West is a highly mixed, creolized society where there are many variations on language and so forth. The fact of the matter is that when I look at what is presented as uniquely Western or Northern European and North American, I see a particularity. And the question is, why do I see it? There were generations before me who did not see it. Part of the reason is that philosophy is already going through its own historic decay. In order to generate radical new and revolutionary philosophical questions, one doesn't have to abandon Western philosophy, just decenter it. One begins to see that insight can be offered by asking different types of questions.

It is interesting that when European and North American philosophy was emerging no one asked whether the questions white philosophers were asking were philosophical questions. Some of the great philosophers did not even believe that they were asking philosophical questions. But these questions generated the process of inquiry that subsequent generations took on, and they became known as philosophical questions. So just as it is problematic to understand the self as having a very static and complete form, similarly it is a problem to look at philosophy in that form. Plato had contributed a lot to philosophy, but he did not raise all of the possible philosophical questions. Different problems emerge in the course of philosophy as we begin to take the risk of going beyond philosophy for philosophy's sake. In some of my recent writings I have called this the teleological suspension of philosophy. And what that means is that there is a certain point in which a philosopher is constrained by the conception of philosophy in his or her time. So in the interest of truth the philosopher is willing to give up philosophy as understood within his or her time, which is paradoxical because philosophy is the pursuit of truth. And that person ends up creating a new philosophy.

For instance, the way many of us talk about experience in philosophy may be such that we fail to see biography as a philosophical problem.

But as we know in our age, biography has emerged as a great social question because we are dealing with serious problems about memory, about accuracy and the understanding of the self. So in our time new questions are being generated that are beginning to generate new philosophical insight. The second chapter of my book *Existentialia Africana*, for instance, examines the problem of biography. Then there are other questions that may emerge. For instance, to what extent is the commitment to a liberal conception of philosophy that is premised on a deontological conception of liberalism—where you suspend the question of the good—a certain problem precisely because truth functions teleologically (or, in other words, because truth is not a purely methodological affair)? There are many instances in the history of science and in the history of philosophy where a commitment purely to method has generated validity but not truth. This is what Merleau-Ponty pointed out in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*. So once we are committed to truth we are already outside of the immediate deontological consideration of a purely methodological stance. This is something that Nietzsche observed as well in the *Will to Power*.

LMA: *Could you say more about the teleological conception of truth?*

LG: The problem, of course, is that what is meant by “the teleological” is not static. There were times when the teleological was God. There were other times when it was Nature. There were still other times when it might be the Good. But the teleological does not have to be static because the fact of the matter is that the way it may function (this is where I think existential phenomenology gets interesting) is as a project. It is what organizes what we do and in the process we develop knowledge through what we have learned in pursuing that project. I do not think that many of us come to philosophy purely to be whiz kid test takers. Instead, we are moved by something to the point that we cannot go back, and it is interesting that philosophers as varied as Dewey and Jaspers and Wittgenstein recognize this. Dewey says there is a special level of inquiry that cannot be settled by an immediate answer. That means that there is something that is functioning teleologically for us. Nishitani in Japan, the late Nishitani, brought up the notion that philosophy by itself cannot address the greater questions with which we need to deal. He said religion can do it, but in the process of focusing on religion he created a new philosophy, a new movement in the Kyoto school of Zen Buddhism and phenomenology. And what I notice when I look back in the history of philosophy, when I am not thinking

about Europe, Africa, Asia, North America, South America, when I am just thinking purely in terms of looking at many philosophers, is that almost every great philosopher was attacked viciously for not really being a philosopher, for not being true to the method of his or her time. What is pretty clear is that what ultimately motivated the philosophers was something teleological. We can see why a lawyer like Hume is so motivated by certain questions that he writes them without worrying about whether he is a philosopher. It is very interesting that today Hume is studied so much as a philosopher even though in his writings he is almost antiphilosophical. Descartes is so enmeshed in physics and mathematics that he ends up developing a new philosophy. He makes a shift from the course of ontology as first philosophy to epistemology as first philosophy. We have all of these questions about Kant's many itinerate careers before he wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but ultimately if we think about the *Critique of Pure Reason* it was issuing the critique of reason.

So, in many ways, what is interesting about the bourgeois revolution is that a lot of the great philosophers of the period were not looking at themselves as philosophers. Many of them were, in fact, on the periphery, and few of them were actually in universities. Even in the nineteenth century, a grand theologian like Hegel, in his effort to connect the rational as the real to his conception of God, gave us a really provocative, creative philosophy. And then there is Kierkegaard, who is constantly saying he is against philosophy. So it is constant. William James the physician. Karl Jaspers the psychologist who, when he decided he wanted to concentrate on philosophical questions, was laughed at, rebuked, attacked constantly. His rivals sent hostile graduate students into his seminars to make fun of him, and they would write these jokes about him. But Jaspers came out with a three-volume philosophy and he really created a shift. And I notice that if you look in other parts of the world, in India, in Japan, in Africa, you find similar patterns.

What is interesting in the twentieth century is that we have a group of individuals on the periphery, predominantly out of communities of color, who lived in a world in which they were not even looked at as the legitimate embodiments of reason. So they said, "Well, if the legitimate embodiments of reason won't recognize me, to hell with them. I won't worry about it." And they dealt with problems they felt were absolutely necessary, fundamental problems for the direction in which humankind was heading. And in pursuing these questions these individuals began to develop new philosophies. They were people like Frantz Fanon, C. L. R.

James. There were also some people in Europe, for example, Simone Weil. You find this as well if you look at what Sylvia Wynter is doing today. Sylvia Wynter doesn't worry about whether she is a philosopher, a literary critic, a novelist, or whatever. She has this problem to look into about the human condition and she addresses it. The wonderful thing is that these writers have generated questions that speak to the present, but they are also giving us lenses through which to look at issues in the future. After you read these works, a lot of what is considered mainstream professional philosophy not only looks parochial and mundane, it also looks dated. Even inane, on some levels. Sometimes when I read the works of thinkers who are considered more mainstream, to me they look one hundred and fifty years behind in their content and level of thought. They have no idea that thought has developed beyond them. And one of the proofs of this has to do with the amount of resources dedicated to their efforts, the idea that a group of individuals from the third world with no university affiliations can, while fighting revolutionary struggles, sit down and begin to reflect on everything from socio-genesis to phobio-genesis to problems of incompleteness and legitimation crises in the human sciences—the very fact that they can do this while mainstream individuals have large grants to go and get Ph.D.s, then become deans of their first world universities to make sure more money is invested in classes so that three individuals can study a very parochial philosophical method. You know, that sort of a thing. It is a sign of decadence in mainstream philosophy.

The thing that that we have to think about when we look at these third world or peripheral writers is, *why* did they write with the level of sophistication that they did? I have written a lot on Fanon so I will use him as an example. Why did he write the way he wrote? It would surely have been easier to write simply demagogic revolutionary tracts or pamphlets, to write as a journalist or to write a very moment-by-moment text. What was he doing in engaging Merleau-Ponty on the body? What was he doing by going through the specifics of Engels's position on violence? What was he doing by going through Jaspers on angst or the question of the limitations of Hegel on recognition? Now, the way I understand it is this: once thinkers are guided by great questions, then even in their concrete practices they need to address these questions. So many of these people are already temporally displaced. They are like castaways on an island putting messages in bottles that are going to float to the future. And in many ways our job in the future is to push it further. I think that every one of these people takes very seriously the value of pushing the human condition to its limits. And

in many ways ultimately that is what philosophy is about. I have always worked with the distinction between the professional technician or the merely professional scholar and the philosopher. I think the philosopher is so moved by struggling with problems of reality that even philosophy is going to be subject to critique and even philosophy may fall, but that is a paradox, isn't it? Because in taking that risk, philosophy flourishes.

By the way, I do not mean to deprecate the work of the merely academic scholar. I think that there is too much antiacademicism going on in the world right now. Academic work is very important, noble work. I think that being purely academic is good for the history of philosophy but not for the creation of philosophy.

LMA: *What is the direction of your work now? What are the questions that you continue to be interested in working on?*

LG: First, I do not look at my books as complete texts. I write books to generate critical exchange and to learn from critics. People have always asked me how I write so much, but it is because I do not take the view that one writes a perfect text. I see my writing as part of the social world, so I write to get the discussions going. I also take the position that when we throw our ideas out there the unexpected comes back to us. My work has generated a lot of discussion, and a lot of things have come out of that over the last eight years. It's funny, I've only been writing for eight years.

LMA: *I remember I first met you when you had just finished grad school.*

LG: That's right, so it's only been eight years. A lot of things have happened that I never expected. So one of the things I learned is that what I write takes on a life of its own and it creates things that come back to me in very unusual ways. But in the process, what I was doing was trying to work on my philosophical ideas. I tend to work out the more abstract philosophical problems I am concerned with through a concrete, particular subject matter. The book on bad faith and antiblack racism was laying the foundations of a particular view of the human sciences. A lot of Fanon scholars missed the point of my book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*. I didn't write that for people who wanted to find out everything Fanon did; I wrote it because Fanon had a set of ideas that were useful to me, and I developed them into my own ideas. *Her Majesty's Other Children* is ostensibly a work of social criticism, but it was generating new theory. That is where, for instance, some of the discussion around semiotics and relationality first came out.

My position on the role of the aesthetic in revolutionary practice is that it should not be a purely functionalist model (which is my position on a lot of issues with regard to the intellectual). *Existentialia Africana*, although initially conceived as trying to work out the parameters of an Africana existential philosophy, began to develop new theory. There is a chapter in there on the problems of human sciences, on DuBois and the theory of oppression, and there is a theory on biography. I also address the question of how to understand the relation of religion to theology. And there is a philosophy of writing in there. Now, these are the fragmented versions of these theories, but some people are on to me. Right now I am heavily involved in institutional building at Brown. And a lot of my immediate writings are addressing theoretical dimensions of building the field. So I am in the midst of disciplinary struggles and struggles against what I call disciplinary decadence. But I do plan to devote my forties to putting a lot of these ideas developed in my earlier work all together into a philosophy that will take up the question of philosophical anthropology. I want to go into the details about why, for instance, I defend a view that reason should not collapse solely into rationality. I see rationality as a subspecies of reason, but not the whole of reason. There is a tendency, for instance, in the modern world and in a lot of contemporary discourses, to create an isomorphism between reason and rationality. I think that is an error.

LMA: *Existentialism has often had a critical view of reason, or at least of the total reliance on reason. Could you say more about how you understand reason?*

LG: Reason must be able to assess rationality. So, for instance, reason may be such that it functions on the level not only of the teleological, but also on emotive levels. One can be reasonably angry. But the idea that the dialectic is between rationality and irrationality is false. There are writings written in the spirit of nonrationality, and that is where reason comes in. Reason has to be able to assess a lot of these categories. Why isn't reason looked at on the level of aesthetics? Not as something that is brought in to organize aesthetics, but as aesthetics? How do we deal with reason properly in dealing with religion? How do we deal with reason properly on the level of categories like intuition? On different levels of cognition? It strikes me that we need a renewed understanding of the discourse of reason. This has been a discussion in phenomenology as well, because in order to be able to assess philosophy phenomenology had to be able to suspend the question of its own ontological legitimacy. So that means that the scope of reason

might be much broader than we think. I tend to look at rationality as more instrumental, in the way Hume tended to—Hume said reason but I think he was talking more about rationality—that it is about how to get what you want, how do you do this or that to get that. But I think reason is greater than that. Reason connects to how we deal with everything, and it is connected to many forms of love. I don't think rationality can play a role in the reflective understanding of a dance. I think rationality is at work at the moment of dancing. So I have to develop a full philosophical treatment of the question of reason. I also have to deal with the question of how one does philosophy if one rejects the notion of systemic and systematic completeness.

This is a full-scale work; the tentative title is simply “Philosophical Treatise,” merely because I will be dealing with so many issues. But many of them have been touched on in my other writings, such as the questions of essence, of possibility, of indexicals, of the complexity of how one deals with temporality, duration, the relationship of the ontological to the epistemological. There are questions also about how we deal with thought beyond the question of simply philosophical thought. The question, for instance, about the scope of religious thought. I am also concerned with the question of how do we deal with patterns of meaning and questions of repetition. But I will begin to write this once I am finished with a lot of the institutional building work I am doing, or at least have contributed my part to this work. The shorter work that I am doing right now is to write a book on mass and class. It strikes me that the distinction between mass and class has been blurred in contemporary U.S. society.

LMA: *“Mass” meaning the masses?*

LG: Well, meaning the concept of mass, or what it is to be in the masses versus a class relation. I have also been asked to put together a compendium on African-American studies, and a lot of the positions I have spoken to you about will be there. I will address this question of the need to restructure the way we think of African-American and Latin American studies. That's going to be a big collective effort. I am also writing a short work on problems of value and decadence. I have been writing for the past two years a series of essays on moral philosophy, ethics, and problems of nihilism and decadence. These questions emerged actually through dealing with another, more specific problem, but it struck me that they were informing my analysis.

LMA: *Okay, my last question. You are one of the most hopeful people I know. And we are living in hard times, the Right is on the rise, the Republicans have engineered a successful coup, neoliberalism has taken over Latin America, there is a terrible AIDS crisis in Africa, and one could go on. So how do you maintain your hopefulness through this?*

LG: Several things. One of them is that I stay focused on the fact that there are problems greater than me. The second thing is I take very seriously that every individual human being is ultimately asked to contribute his or her share. The third thing is that it is really sobering when one looks through the sort of intellectual history I look through. I look through the work of people who lived in times that were even bleaker than ours. It is incredible to me to think about the people we study—you know, W. E. B. DuBois or Alexander Crummel or Anna Julia Cooper or Maria Stewart—and the abilities they had, to the point that they could easily converse with us in the present. What must it have meant to have lived in the past they lived in with those abilities? The closest thing I could imagine to it is being in a straitjacket in a deprivation tank and trying to leave some message for the future. And it strikes me that they had so many victories where it really looked like they would fail. Harriet Tubman had no reason to believe that by the 1860s there would at least have been a law rendering slavery illegal. She had no reason to believe it, and it didn't matter. So ultimately I take the position that there are just things we need to do, period, and I focus on doing them. The question of success, on a large level, I don't have the answer for. But on the shorter term levels, I have been fortunate in that most of the struggles I have been involved in are ones where we have had a lot of success. And I see the immediate impact of that. But again, I have always taken the position that a genuine commitment to truth is such that you don't worry about those factors. You just do what you need to do, period.

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