

Philosophy 3968 / H186001

Black Existentialism

Lewis R. Gordon

Mondays, 2:40 PM

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Office hours: Mondays 11:00 AM–12:30 PM, by appointment only, Room 738 Anderson Hall

This course examines problems of existence as posed by black thought in philosophy and literature.

**Texts: (All paperback editions)**

Richard Wright, *Native Son*. Harper Perennial; ISBN: 0060809779

Richard Wright, *The Outsider*. Harper Collins; ISBN: 0060812486

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. Random House; ISBN: 0679732764

James Baldwin, *Another Country*. Knopf; ISBN: 0679744711

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. Dutton/Plume; ISBN: 0452273056<sup>1</sup>

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press; ISBN: 0802150845. [[[Charles Lamm Markmann translation—do not purchase the new edition. If not available, check on line.]]]]

Cornel West, *Race Matters*. Beacon; ISBN: 0679749861

Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Temple; 156639595X

Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*. University of Chicago Press; ISBN: 0226048977

Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, Nigel Gibson, editors, *Biko Lives!: Contesting*

*the Legacies of Steve Biko*. Palgrave; ISBN-10: 0230606490 / ISBN-13: 978-0230606494

Lewis Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black*. Routledge; ISBN: 0415914515

Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*. Humanity/Prometheus Books; ISBN:

1573925349

Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*. Routledge; ISBN 0415926440

Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*; ISBN ISBN-10: 0521675464 /

ISBN-13: 978-0521675468

**Requirements:** two take-home examinations. The first is worth 30 percent of your grade. The second is 50 percent of your grade. The remaining 20 percent is from attendance and class participation.

**Sessions**

**Reading assignments and topics**

9/8 Introductions and discussion of syllabus

**Part I: Literary Black Existentialism: “Experience,” “Being,” and “The Situation”**

9/15 First half: Problems of existence, problems of existence in black. **Recommended reading:** Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*, chapter 1; Paget Henry, “African and Afro-Caribbean Existential Philosophy,” and “Rastafarianism and the Reality of Dread,” from *Existence in Black*, and “Introduction” to Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*.

Second half: Richard Wright, *Native Son* and “How Bigger Thomas Was Born.” What is the relationship between choice and meaning for “the marginalized” of the modern world?

9/22 Second half: Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (read to the middle). What is the significance of dread and the growing sense of the demonic underside of living as an outsider? How does “guilt” configure in the life of an outsider? What is the significance of “responsibility” in Wright’s depiction of the outsider’s struggle to be? And what is required in order “to be” at the end of this text? **Recommended reading:** Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and Floyd Hayes, III, “The Concept of Double Vision in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*,” in *Existence in Black*

- 9/29 Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Why is hypervisibility a form of invisibility? What are some of the "Catch 22" dynamics of the search for authenticity in black?
- 10/6 Race and Judaism conference: Paley Library. Attend whichever session you can. See website: <http://www.temple.edu/isrst/>
- 10/13 Additional reading session: Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin, *Another Country*; from *Existence in Black*—Earnest Allen, Jr., "On the Rereading of Riddles"; Lewis Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility"; Gary Schwartz, "Toni Morrison at the Movies," in *Existence in Black* (chap. 8); Patricia Huntington, "Fragmentation, Race, and Gender"; Anna Julia Cooper, "What Are We Worth?" and (on blackboard); and Lewis Gordon, "Race, Biraciality, and Mixed Race—in Theory" and Lewis Gordon, "Sex, Race, and Matrices of Desire" (both on blackboard) and David Fryer, "African-American Queer Studies" (blackboard)
- 10/20 Discussion of Morrison and Baldwin on the sexualization and sexuality of racial existence. The underside of creolization—How is "bad mixture" *lived*? What are the existential limits of racial mimesis.

First take-home examination assignment will be assigned on 10/20 and due on 10/22 by email attachment to [lewgord@yahoo.com](mailto:lewgord@yahoo.com) by 9:30 AM.

### Part II: Black Existential *Thought* and the Question of Liberation

- 10/27 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (entirety). Recommended: Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*; and Lewis Gordon, "Through the Zone of Non-Being" (on blackboard)
- 11/3 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (entirety). Lewis Gordon, "Foreword" and the essays in Part I of *Biko Lives! Part I*. George Carew, "Liberalism and the Politics of Emancipation," in *Existence in Black* (chap. 18)
- 11/10 Cornel West, *Race Matters*. What (paradoxically) is the significance of nihilism in black communities? **Additional Reading:** Roy D. Morrison, "Self-transformation in American Blacks," *Existence in Black*, chap. 2 and Clarence Johnson, "Cornel West as Pragmatist and Existentialist," in *Existence in Black* (chap. 19) and (on blackboard) "The Four Traditions of Response" and Lewis Gordon, "The Unacknowledged Fourth Tradition"
- 11/17 Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Are Afrocentrism and Afrocentricity forms of black existentialism?
- 11/24 Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Part I). What is bad faith and how is it relevant to the study of racism? *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Parts II, III, IV, V). How is antiracism a form of bad faith? **Additional:** Naomi Zack, "Race, Life, Death, Tragedy, and Good Faith"; all of these from *Existence in Black*. **Recommended:** (blackboard) Paget Henry, "Potentiated Double Consciousness"
- 12/1 Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*. Africana existential philosophy
- 12/8 Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Concluding discussion and *final take-home examination will be assigned. Due by email attachment to [lewgord@yahoo.com](mailto:lewgord@yahoo.com) at 9:30 AM, December 10<sup>th</sup>.*

Any student who has a need for special accommodations due to disabilities should speak with me as soon as possible to discuss the specific situation and contact Disability Resources and Services, located in Ritter Annex, at 215.204.1280. Finally, the University has adopted a policy on Student and Faculty Academic Rights and Responsibilities (Policy #03.70.02) which can be accessed at [http://policies.temple.edu/getdoc.asp?policy\\_no=03.70.02](http://policies.temple.edu/getdoc.asp?policy_no=03.70.02)

There are other novels, music, and film that you should read, listen to, and view along the way, or after the class, that could enrich your understanding of this material. The following list isn't exhaustive, but it consists of works that will be a good start.

***Recommended films:***

Marcel Camus, *Black Orpheus* (1959)  
Lina Wertmüller, *Swept Away* (1975) and *The Seven Beauties* (1975)  
Euzhan Palcy, *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983)  
Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (1977)  
Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1990)  
Haile Gerima, *Bush Mama* (1967) and *Sankofa* (1993)  
Fernando Meirelles, *City of God* (2002)  
Perry Henzell, *The Harder They Come* (1962)  
James Clavell, *To Sir, With Love* (1967)  
Lina Wertmüller, *The Seven Beauties* (1976)  
Francis Ford Coppola, *The Great Gatsby* (1974)  
Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather I* (1972) and *II* (1974)  
Woody Allen, *Crimes and Misdemeanor* (1989)  
Spike Lee, *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *She Hate Me* (2004)  
Stephen Frears (Dir.) and Steven Knight (written by), *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002)  
Woody Allen, *Crimes and Misdemeanor* (1989)  
John Duigan, *Flirting* (1992)

***Novels, Plays, and Biographies:***

Many, but try at some point to read:

M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*  
Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* and *Autobiography of My Mother*  
Amiri Baraka, *The Dutchman*  
Jean Genet, *Les Nigres*  
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*  
F. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*  
A. Camus, *The Plague* and *The Stranger*  
J-P Sartre, *Nausea*  
J-P Sartre, "The Wall" and *Other Essays*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*  
Monifa Love, *Freedom in the Dismal*  
M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*  
Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*  
M. Love, *Dreaming Underground*  
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Short Stories*

***Listen to Music, especially the Blues***

*Recommended:*

*The Dinah Washington Double CD Collection*  
*Billie Holiday collection*  
*The Charles Mingus Anthology (especially Notes on Integration)*  
*Thelonius Monk Anthology*  
*John Coltrane Anthology*, but especially *A Love Supreme*  
Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On* and *I Want You*  
Portishead, *Dummie*

Bob Marley, *Survival* or one of the anthologies of most of his songs  
Peter Tosh, *I Am*  
Jonie Mitchell, *Mingus* or one of the double-cd collections of her works  
Mozart, *Don Giovanni*  
Abbie Lincoln, *Turtle's Dream*  
Max Roach and Abbie Lincoln, *We Insist*  
Jimmy Hendrix (everything)  
Curtis Mayfield (everything)  
Me'Shell Ndegeocello, *Peace Beyond Passion*  
Angie Stone (every cd)  
Nacimiento (whatever you can get your hands on)  
Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet*  
Duke Ellington, *Black and Tan Fantasy*  
Jackie Wilson collection of greatest hits  
*Bo Diddly* collection  
*Best of Burning Spear*  
*Best of Steel Pulse*  
Lucia Souza (everything)  
The Mighty Sparrow (everything)

*There are many more philosophical books, films, and music, which will be referred to in class, but you should acquire some familiarity with the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Gabriel Marcel, to name several.*