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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR LEONARD HARRIS

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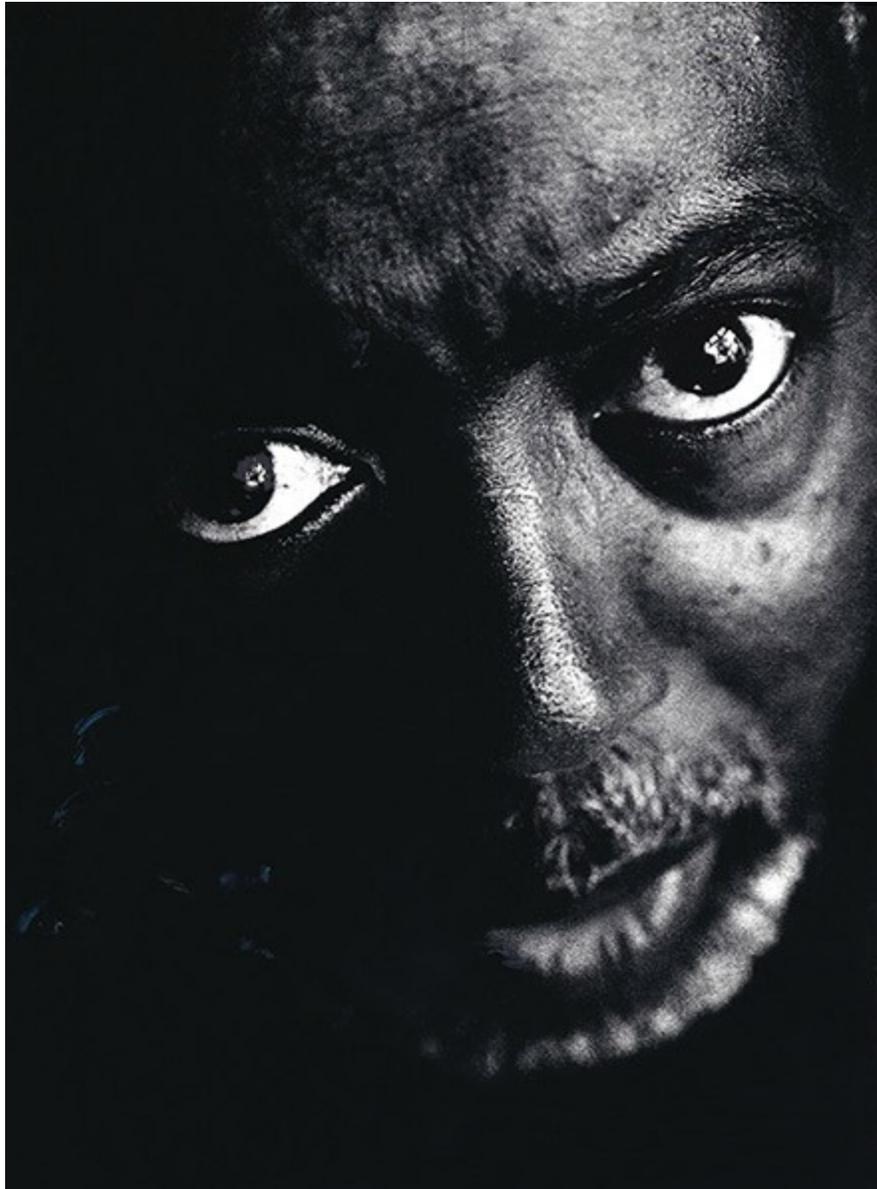


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Biography

Leonard Harris is Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University. He has published in many areas related to Africana philosophy, including Pragmatism, Ontology, and Community and is the author of the ‘philosophy as born of struggle’ (Fredrick Douglass) conception of philosophy, the ethics of insurrection, conception of traditions as valuable inventions yet horror stories and racism as a form of killing or necro-being. Harris is the author of groundbreaking texts in Africana Philosophy such as *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (1983) (works by and about African American philosophers on experience and struggle); *Racism* (1999) (competing theories of explanation by authors from global geographical regions); editor, *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke* (2009) (Locke’s philosophy including views on pluralism and race); co-author, *Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* (2009) (biography); co-editor, J. A. Carter of *Philosophic Values and World Citizenship: Locke to Obama and Beyond* (2010) (authors from America, Europe, and Africa considering contributions and limitations of Locke’s value theory). Harris’s controversial theories are also in articles and symposium discussions: Symposium on Insurrectionist Ethics (Harrisonian approach), *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society*, 49, 1, Winter 2013; “Insurrectionist Ethics: Advocacy, Moral Psychology, and Pragmatism,” John Howie, ed., *Ethical Issues for a New Millennium*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002, 192-210; “Walker: Naturalism and Liberation,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 49, 1, 2013: 93-111; “Telos and Tradition: Making the Future, Brides to Future Traditions,” *Philosophia Africana*, 16, 2, Winter 2014: 59-71; “Tolerance, réconciliation et groupes,” *Guerre et Réconciliation, Journée de la Philosophie à l’ UNESCO*, 2003, 59-94; “Universal Human Liberation and Community: Pixley Kalsaka Seme and Alain L. Locke,” in Claude Sumner, Samuel W. Yohannes, eds., *Perspectives in African Philosophy: An Anthology on ‘Problematics of an African Philosophy: Twenty Years After (1976-1996),’* Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Printing Press, 2002, 150-159. Harris is one of the original founders of Philosophy Born of Struggle Association and the Alain Locke Society, each sponsoring annual conferences. He has lectured at many universities, such as in China at Central China Normal University, Wuhan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Fudan University, Xiamen University, Peking University, a lecture series for the Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, W.E.B. Du Bois Center, Harvard University, and the University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Azuka Nzegwu: In your words, tell us who you are, what you are about, and what you teach.

Leonard Harris: My mother’s family were migrants from Birmingham, Alabama and my father, a migrant from Tuskegee, Alabama where he used to walk around George Washington

Carver's (famous scientist) lab before he migrated north to Cleveland, Ohio. I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio.

I promote the voices of Afro-American people. My first anthology, *Philosophy Born of Struggle, Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* staged the voices of African-Americans, with their philosophies about the nature of experience, explanation, interpretation, justified methods of protest, identity, culture, liberation and existential being.

I teach philosophy. The course "Philosophy of Race," for example, considers competing moral conceptions of racism and races; "Philosophy and the African American Experience" uses the works of contemporary individual philosophers such as Angela Davis or Charles Mills; sometimes I focus on representatives of different schools of thought, for example, Alain Locke and critical pragmatist or Stephen Ferguson and materialism.

Azuka Nzegwu: Why did you choose philosophy? Was it love at first sight, if so, how did it develop?

Leonard Harris: Professor Francis Thomas, at Central State University, Ohio, in 1968 recommended me to Robert Harris, Miami University, Ohio. Thomas was asked by Harris for a qualified Negro student to attend graduate school at Miami University—Thomas choose me. I was taking philosophy courses left and right and publishing a poetry magazine, *JEM*.

I was given an opportunity and I took it with no idea of what philosophers do. It was, and is not, love of the profession. Doing philosophy is simply what I am.

Azuka Nzegwu: How do you personally define African and/or Africana philosophy? What makes this area of philosophy particularly distinct and exciting for you?

Leonard Harris: Whatever folks do who engage in the issues that emanating from the history of racial segregation in the Americas define African American philosophic voices and thereby African American philosophy. African Philosophy, broadly defined, is created by authors that participate in the community of dialogue from various communities in Africa. Africana Philosophy is the community of philosophers addressing any of the issues from these communities. That is, from Africa and all of its diaspora.

Here are examples of who I mean by African philosophers, early modern Anton Amo, or contemporary: J. O. Sodipo, Alex Kagame, Odera Oruka, Tsenay Serequeberhan, Kibujjod Kakumba, Claude Sumner, P. O. Bodurin, Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondj, Stanlake Samkange, Kwame Gyekye, Olufemi Taiwo, D. A. Masolo, M. A. Romosa, Magobo Moore, Chielozona Eze, Nkolo Foe, Munyaradzi Murove, Gail Presby, Oumar Dia, Semou Pathe Gu-eye. Certainly, there are many many more, for example, folks working the Islamic humanist tradition or the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition. But these are examples of philoso-

phers, each with their own conception of reality, morality and being; some atheists, some rationalist, some materialist, etc.

African American philosophers engage radically different issues than most African philosophers, whether Alain Locke or Angela Davis. Race dominates the Americans and West Indians; almost none have anything to say about creating geographically bounded nations, entitlements to learn or publish in a language besides English, or anything to say about any religion other than Christianity.

The whole collective of different voices and traditions constitute Africana philosophy.

Azuka Nzegwu: What specific topics of African and/or Africana philosophy resonate with you? What do you want to pass on to your students, as well as to the next generation of thinkers?

Leonard Harris: Conceptions of community, tradition, insurrection and ontology.

Azuka Nzegwu: What, if any, role does philosophy play in helping us understand the national, social and economic issues of our time?

Leonard Harris: It is usually useless in such matters. Nothing about abstractions, distinctions, clarifications or competing ideations tell someone what exactly to think about any particular condition. There is no magic derivation manual that tells you what particular policy or practice is warranted because of a generalization. They only provide an orientation.

Azuka Nzegwu: Teaching is an important profession that makes a big difference. Why did you choose to be a professor? Or was that path inevitable?

Leonard Harris: Teaching provides a living that allows me to write. I am not a part of some mystical mission of teaching as some sort of magic profession creating big differences; at best, teaching can offer a small contributions to the life of the mind.

Azuka Nzegwu: Reflecting on philosophy and Africa, philosophy and black life, philosophy and black knowledge, how do we ensure those remain part of the epistemological framework of philosophy? How do we ensure that the progress we make does not die out? How do we preserve our legacies?

Leonard Harris: Preserving intellectual legacies is a constant project involving publication,

supporting archives, hosting conferences, and promoting potentially influential books, etc.

There is nothing that matches “black knowledge” let alone an epistemological framework that matches black life. There is no “Negro” or “African” mind somehow embedded in competing African traditions and religions, let alone contemporary life. Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo do not share some sort of common African or black ‘knowledge’. Romantic racialism (which says all Africans are authentically African if they share the same set of principles from some illusionary ancient era of undifferentiated life) including some forms of Afrocentricity, are just that, romantic.

Azuka Nzegwu: Since philosophy is about ideas, can you speak on the idea of transformatory change in light of your local politics?

Leonard Harris: There is no simple link between philosophic ideas and local politics. I promote the ethics of insurrection—an ethics that emphasizes the need to transform conditions that make misery possible. There is no algorithm for that. I have argued that we should completely destroy all forms of minstrelsy; abandon all forms of its artistic performances and leave it, at best, by library archives. Promoting this on a local level I suspect will take numerous forms.

Azuka Nzegwu: How does African and/or Africana philosophy build our knowledge? What epistemological concerns do we have to pay attention to?

Leonard Harris: Philosophy does not build “knowledge” when ‘knowledge’ means verifiable or confirmable beliefs. I reject all forms of metaphysics such that some “essential” essence is somehow encoded in extant social or cognitive categories. Human life is just the life of a species. Given that there is no moral universe – good acts nor bad acts are not recorded in a transcendental realm nor punishment, rewards, nor redemptions exists anywhere other than in extant life – knowledge should be of value to the species.

I think the most epistemological concerns we have, as African people involve (1) the problem of fallibilism (the oppressed often have misguided ideas about their own condition and ways to end their misery); few philosophies consider ways to reason that may help overcome the problem (2) the problem of racist essentialism – namely, when universalizable ideas authored by African people are seen as only ideas relevant to Africans (e.g., when “African spirituality” means that a god such as Ogun or form of belief in a transcendental spirit realm is considered only befitting Africans; or refusing to treat African originated religions are considered “traditional” or “classical” which is code for religions that are to be treated like mythologies like the belief in Zeus as the same sort God as Ogun – patently mythology whereas seri-

ous religions, like Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, etc. could be believed by anyone and considered as true for false. Or the racial essential exemplified when “African-American Philosophy” is considered a sphere of intellectual heritage that produces philosophies only relevant to African Americans.

Azuka Nzegwu: There are lots of African concepts that speak to humanity and community. Within the global diaspora, to what extent should Africa derived values shape the philosophy and lives of people of African descent?

Leonard Harris: Like the philosopher Alain Locke I believe that African contributions to the worlds’ intellectual growth is massive and rarely appreciated. Trying to foreground those creations and contributions in every arena is a valuable mission; yet, racial exceptionalism is misguided. There is no world of polylogics – where every race has an authentic moral personality and providence or the nature of history encodes races with a destiny or unique contribution to a mythical transcendental sphere of knowledge. There are lots of different, and conflicting (Yoruba vs. Zulu, Asante vs. Amharic, etc.) values that can be derived from Africa. The ones that should be used depends on the warrant of the values, whether African or not. As I have argued for a long time, traditions have valuable features (share meanings convey, feelings of welcome, etc.) and they are horror stories—trapping people, preventing change, creating false images of authenticity, etc. African traditions are just as troubling as any other. “The Horror of Tradition or How to Burn Babylon and Build Benin While Reading *A Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, [Le Roi Jones], *Philosophical Forum*, 1992.”

I favor the social justice humanist traditions among Africans and hope those traditions gain ascendancy, that is, humanist (not religionist); socially progressive (not ethnocentric); communal (against the radical class divisions too common among contemporary Africans); cosmopolitan (contra pro-nationalism); insurrectionist ethics (contra romantic piety and altruist values), critical pragmatism (no metaphysics and truth as pragmatic and instrumental), aesthetics of advocacy (symmetry, balance, coherency can be well conveyed by media of social justice), racial eliminativism and a cosmopolitan Pan-Africanist.

Azuka Nzegwu: Who has inspired and motivated you? Who has influenced your work?

Leonard Harris: Francis Thomas, Marian Musgrave (teachers at Central State University); influences: Edward W. Blyden, Karl Marx, Alain Locke, Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Davis.

Azuka Nzegwu: The movement #BlackLivesMatter was started by three black women to address racism and racial injustice prevalent in the United States. The movement is quintessential in that it brings to us the issue of inequality that many blacks including people of color

face in America, and other parts of the world. It does so in a way that disrupts traditional protest hierarchy by forcing the nation and former community leaders to look at its past and at its promise. In what ways has the quest for equality and humanity been crucial to our identity and selves, both nationally and globally?

Leonard Harris: You answered your own question. The struggle of equality and fair treatment is a substantive feature of African American history.

The prison abolition movement, (a movement I favor), with the goal of not only stopping vicious race based murders of African Americans and ending racist stereotypes that treat black lives with no respect but with also the goal of completely ending the existence of all prisons – in America, Africa and the whole world. Although not popular among black or white Americans, the abolition movement, which favors restorative just and not punitive or retributive justice, has gained additional recognition.

Azuka Nzegwu: How do you teach African and/or African philosophy? What politics do you face within your university or college?

Leonard Harris: Nothing unique.

Azuka Nzegwu: What are you currently working on? Projects? Books?

Leonard Harris:

Books: *Why I Am Not A Christian: Black or Otherwise*. Given that the arguments against the existence of God are well established, I consider the ways African people have approached theological subjects and practices and hope to provide reasons for why they should reject all forms of religious mythology and see them as ultimately useless, if not harmful, practices even if the practices are beneficial in the short run; they cannot destroy the conditions that make misery possible.

What, then, is a Philosophy Born of Struggle? I focus on what it is to reject the Socratic method and its contrived traditions and promote a way of doing philosophy as an agential source, not from professional philosophers, the leisure class, sages, racial minds, traditions or sacred texts, but from the world of the subjugated.

Projects: Promoting the Alain Locke Society (Alainlocke.com), and Philosophy Born of Struggle Association (PBOS.com).

Azuka Nzegwu: What are the challenges in teaching African and/or Africana philosophy in the US and Africa?

Leonard Harris: The local challenge is to encourage interest in philosophy and promote valuable works by its authors. The broader challenge is to escape entrapment in the same way of doing philosophy as ‘Western’ philosophers; i.e., relying on single authored texts written in English, concern with a narrow heritage of authors asking the same question and using American defined concepts of race.

The battles to have works published in languages besides English, who owns publishing sources – print, digital or otherwise – and who creates technologies of communication (cell phones, copywritten web pages, etc.) pits African people against one another (Anglophone vs Lusophone; Abrahamic religious missionaries and theologies vs. Buddhist, etc.). “Philosophy of Philosophy: Race, Nation and Religion,” *Graduate Journal of Philosophy*, 35:1-2, (2014), 369-80. These are conflicts that do not admit of compromise.

Azuka Nzegwu:* How do we increase the presence of black students in African and/or Africana philosophy?

Leonard Harris: Most African Americans interested in abstract conceptual ideas are usually in theological institutions. Philosophy is offered as a major in only a few HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Encourage students to consider philosophy as a viable profession that requires attending graduate school.

– Azuka Nzegwu

* Azuka Nzegwu, PhD. is Managing Editor of Africa Knowledge Project. She studies the underlying philosophy of language and information recalibration in the digital medium, and coined the term ‘podicle’ (2011) to define a new digital form of scholarship. She specialized in virtual whirlpooling of knowledge systems and the technical specification for software. She guest produced/edited a number of journal special issues, “African and African Diasporan Writers,” *JENdA: A Journal of African Women Studies*, (30, 2017); “A Dialogue with African and Africana Philosophers,” *Journal on African Philosophy (JAP)* (14, 2016), “The Lwa and The Orisha: Spiritual Transmission and the Gifting of African-based Religions to the World,” *JAP* (12, 2015); “Papa Edgard and His Mambos: Inside African Spirituality Practices of Vodou in America,” *JENdA: A Journal of African Women Studies* (21, 2012); “Rachel Dolezal: White Privilege Equals Access,” *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness* (12, 2015); “Dedication: Remembering Trayvon Martin,” *ProudFlesh* (7, 2013); and “African Women In Dimensions: Part I and II,” *JENdA* (17 & 18, 2010). She published two book chapters “Entering the New Digital Frontier: Creating An Onitsha Digital Archive,” *Onitsha at the Millennium* (Africa Resource Press, 2013), and “Redefining Africa in the Diaspora with New Media Technologies: The Making of AfricaResource.com,” *The New African Diaspora* (Indiana University Press, 2009). Her four journal articles are, “Hurricane Katrina and the Structural Politics of Race in America,” *JAP* (13, 2016), “The Use of Oral History in Historical Text: The WPA Narratives,” *ProudFlesh* (9, 2014), “Where Are The Women? Restoring Women’s Voices To Historical Memory and National Consciousness: Assessing the Biafran War of 1967-1970,” *West Africa Review (WAR)* (14, 2009), and “Introducing Podicle: Configuring the Basis of Engagement and Knowledge Dissemination of Scholarly Discourse,” *WAR* (18, 2011). She also published a poem, “Invisible Soldiers,” *JENdA* (Issues of Our Time, 2013). She directed, produced, & publicly screened a documentary “From Asia to America’s Heartland” subsequently published in *JENdA* (13, 2008).