
Response to Phil Smith Lecture

LOOKING INTO THE EYES OF ADULT PLEASURES

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Lewis Gordon begins his eloquent book, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times*¹ with a quotation from D.H. Lawrence and then comments that Lawrence “looked into the eyes of adult pleasures and their sensibilities and understood the importance of dying without regrets.” I’d like to let Gordon’s words stand as an epigraph for this essay.

Look at me. Take a good look.

Now there are a couple of people who know this, but most readers of this essay, I suspect, will be surprised to find out that in 1974, I made it to the finals of a Bushwick break-dance battle in Brooklyn—though we called it “uprock” then, not “break dance.” I bet you’re surprised.

And, I bet that you’d also be surprised to learn that two years later I was one of the very first club DJs to use the Technics SL1200 turntable, which any decent contemporary hip-hop DJ could tell you was *the* prototype for the turntables of choice today.

Just by looking at me, you wouldn’t have guessed, would you? And why is that? Because, I’m an ol’ white guy, and ol’ white guys don’t do those kinds of things. Aren’t I right?

Well, you’re right. I just made all of that up. I mean—look at me! I’m an ol’ white guy!

But the emphasis needs to be on the “ol’” part, not the “white guy” part. If I were an ol’ black guy, you shouldn’t have believed me either. The fact is that you’d have to be skeptical of any guy like me who is but a whisper from the age of sixty years old who made such claims.² Because, if I had told you that I actually won several jitterbug contests when I was young□ well, that you could believe. And that would be true. I did. Nothing grand. Just some local record hops. And it is also true that in the mid-70s there were people who gave me “DJ” as part of a nickname. But there is no comparison to what I did to earn my nickname and what hip-hop DJs do today. No, the truth is hip-hop does not speak to me. Hip hop does not speak to me like it does to the series of fantastic students I have had over the last decade who proudly identify themselves as being of the “hip-hop generation.” But while hip-hop does not speak to me personally, it does to them, and I like what I see in them, so there must be something important and good about hip-hop. So, when I say that hip-hop does not speak to me, I’m not suggesting that there is anything wrong with hip-hop, I’m just saying that when you look at me, you will not see hip-hop in me.

I have a secret dream: one that my family knows, but few others. Since I was about fourteen years old right up to the present day, I have wished that I were a member of a doo-wop group. It's true. I still listen to doo-wop. Frequently. Unlike hip-hop, doo-wop speaks to me. Now part of the reason for that is because I come from the Philadelphia area. If you know anything about doo-wop, you know what that means. Philly was part of the birth of doo-wop, and it was charting in Philly for at least a decade after the rest of the nation had moved on to the Beatles and the rest of the English Invasion. In fact, I'm told, doo-wop still claims a place in the live music scene in Philly today. So, look at me. If you want to know who I am, you have to see the doo-wop within me.

But I'm not just doo-wop. For approximately fifteen years I was, in the words of Michael Franks, a "white boy lost in the blues."³ Morning, noon, and night (or perhaps I should say noon, night, and into the early morning) the blues was in my ears and in my heart and in my soul. The blues speak to me, still. All kinds of blues: Delta Blues, Bottleneck Blues, Chicago Blues, and the Country Blues of Sonny and Brownie. So, when you look at me, if you want to know who I am, you have to see the blues within me.

Of course, those of you who know me know that even more than doo-wop and more than the blues, jazz has been central to my life. In fact, jazz entered my life while still in my crib, and there has hardly been more than two days in a row in the last 30 years when I haven't listened to at least some jazz.

But though many of you know that I love jazz, you might be surprised to know that I also love classical music. Yeah, you heard me right. I love those old white guys. I listen to a lot of classical music. Not so much the big symphonies, but the more intimate chamber music. And I like Mozart better than Beethoven (at least when we are talking of chamber music), and if you know anything about classical music, you now know a lot about who I am. I like to go to classical music concerts, and when I go, I sometimes dress up. I put on a coat and tie. Now I know that might surprise some of you who have known me for decades and never seen me in a tie. But I do. I dress up. I call it "showing my colors." I put on my WASP ethnic costume to go and celebrate my WASP ethnic heritage. Besides jazz, classical music is what is most often played in my home.⁴ So, when you look at me, if you want to know who I am, you have to see the classical music in me.

But I will admit that when I really need to get in touch with myself, when I really need to connect, I don't put on a Mozart piano sonata; I put on Monk. Or Trane. Or Ornette. I listen to all kinds of jazz, but for me the word "jazz" means "bop"□ bebop or hard-bop or post-bop, with a big space for free jazz. When I need to recover from a hard day or when I need to come down from an over-invigorated evening or when I sit down with a good friend and philosophize over a bottle of whiskey into the early morning, I'm more likely to be listening to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers than the Julliard String

Quartet. So, when you look at me, if you want to know who I am, above all else, you have to see the jazz within me.

Now I am keenly aware of the dangers of what I am saying. Roger Hewitt's ethnography, *White Talk, Black Talk*, conducted twenty years ago when he followed white London youth who spoke black patois, makes clear what happens when whites take on the identity markers of blacks.⁵ Honestly, I'm not a "wannabe." I am no "wigger." I am not trying to take on black identity markers. I want to be very careful to recognize that jazz, doo-wop, R&B, soul, and hip-hop speak to young black youth in ways that they can never speak to young white youth. These days I'm often asked why it is that hip-hop has been taken up by so many white suburban kids. And I point out that the culture of white youth has always been mapped by the culture of urban black youth – at least since the 1920s. Perhaps, it is the need for a style to represent their chafing against the constraints of adult society that leads them to take up what would otherwise appear to be such a foreign experience. But for whatever their reasons, white youth taking up the style of black youth is not a new phenomenon. And of course, this taking up of black resistance by privileged whites is exactly what Charles Mingus (I believe it was) complained about when he said that black jazz musicians grew so frustrated with whites imitating their music that they pushed the edge so far that whites couldn't follow. And he may be right for other than fellow bassist Charlie Haden, I know of no white musician who has successfully gone that far down the road. But I know a lot of white jazz fans who willingly and enthusiastically have followed along.

First and foremost, I, as Kip Kline does, want to recognize these voices as speaking to the black experience in ways that those of us who have, for no sensible reason and through no choice of our own, been assigned to white or brown or yellow or red racial categories. It would be presumptuous and arrogant of us to assume that somehow through this music and lifestyle I can fully understand the raw experience of being, in Gordon's important correction to the title of Frantz Fanon's book, the "damned of the earth."⁶ Perhaps it is true that experience with the black aesthetic can help whites better understand the black experience. I think that that is true. Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Tupac Shakur can help whites gain some insight into the black experience, *but* we should never presume that through such art that experience is fully revealed to us. It is not. And it cannot be. But that isn't my point today. I am not here to suggest that somehow whites can somehow gain insight into the black experience through reading black philosophers. I am here to speak to something a little different than that.

I remember the first book of philosophy by a black author that grabbed hold of me. It wasn't Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. I'm sorry to admit that as an eighteen year-old, I really didn't get the point as to why white women had to be raped. Nor was it Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power*,

though I did understand and accept their thesis immediately. No, it was a couple of years later, in 1970, when I first read Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Now there was a book that spoke to me. That book ripped open my chest and shook my guts to the ground and stomped all over them and then insisted that I pick them back up and reinsert them. Now that book spoke to me like no book of philosophy or literature, white or black, ever had. Not even DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk* or Richard Wright's *Black Boy* spoke to this white boy like the *Wretched of the Earth* did. Not even Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* had.⁷ My life has not been the same since reading that book. So, what's my point?⁸

Throughout this response I've asked you to look at me. Now take a look at Kip. What do you see? A young white guy. Here we meet at a conference whose theme is "The Big Chill": The Denial of Racial Discourse in Modern Philosophy," and what do you get for a keynoter and his respondent but two white guys? So what else is new? That tells you a lot, doesn't it? But what? What does it tell you? To have two white guys speaking to the relevance and importance of black philosophy might tell you of the way in which whites continue to colonize the black experience, to usurp it and rob it and exploit it. But look again, because texts speak with more than one voice. It is true of music. It is true of philosophy. And it is true of our bodies. It is certainly true that bebop, and doo-wop, and hip-hop speak to black youth in a way in which whites should never claim as their own. But to live in good faith also requires that we acknowledge the truths of our own existence. In a racialized society, our assigned racial identities require the others. I'm an ol' white guy, and Kip is a young white guy. But our so-called "whiteness" is not the absence of "Blackness" or "Latin-ness" or "Asian-ness." In our racialized society, if we are to live in good faith, we must recognize that which is within all of us, and race is in all of us. In all of my teaching, perhaps the most difficult idea for me to teach is Paulo Freire's idea that "the oppressors are themselves oppressed." On the surface this looks patently false. And too often, when finally accepted by someone, it is merely accepted with facile understanding. As if we all have equal struggles in the world. As if we can erase oppression by claiming we are all equally oppressed. But that is not Freire's point. For Freire, the oppressors are themselves oppressed because within the oppressor exists the oppressed too. It can be no other way. Look at me again. I'm not just an ol' white guy. I'm an ol' white guy. And I'm an ol' white, upper middle-class guy. In fact, I'm an ol' white, upper middle-class, straight guy. I am, in fact, as socially privileged as they come. Through no credit of my own doing (and I should add through no fault of my own either) I am a member of every socially privileged category that a person can be.

But look at me fully, and look at Kip. You cannot understand either of us unless you understand that jazz and blues and doo-wop for me and, I think, hip-hop for Kip are not voyeurism nor imperialism nor mere tourism for us, but that these aesthetic lifestyles along with the works of black philosophers (and, in our case, especially that of the Africana philosophers) speak to us

personally□ as human beings. Yes, as racialized human beings, but also as human beings. And as human beings trying to move through our lives in good faith, we cannot rip away that which is in our souls.

I would like to conclude my response with a quotation from an article by Michael Monahan on race and authenticity published in a recent issue of *Philosophia Africana*. Monahan writes:

There is also a kind of authenticity that has to do with emotional genuineness. Statements, or appeals, or promises, for example, can be “authentic,” in this way, when they are offered sincerely (in *good faith*)....Accordingly, one is racially authentic to the degree that one acknowledges, without over- or underemphasizing, the role that race plays in one's own life and the lives of others. To be inauthentic, then, is not a matter of fooling others so much as fooling one's self. It is not a failure to *correspond* with the underlying facts so much as a failure to be *sincere* with oneself, and with others, regarding the underlying facts of racial reality....It is not about *performing* one's race, but rather about politically....*engaging* it.

And Monahan concludes with these words:

One is racially authentic to the extent that one is never *comfortable* with one's race. I cannot simply accept or deny my racial designation, for I play a role, no matter how small, in bringing that designation about, and my participation in this process, willing or not, stands as a challenge to take up a political commitment in relation to race in keeping with my larger moral and political commitments to justice and human dignity. To fail in this is to deceive no one but myself.⁹

And finally, I would like to thank Najee Muhammad for selecting this theme for our conference this year. And I'd like to thank Kip Kline for so ably setting the right tone for our conversation, because for far too long the discourse of race has been far too absent.

NOTES

1. Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2006).
2. That phrase, “but a whisper from the age of sixty,” is borrowed from Peter McLaren's R. Freeman Butts Lecture at the AESA conference in Toronto in 1996. Ever since I heard him use that phrase, I've wanted to use it and since I only have a few months left, I thought that this might be the last time that I had a chance—so, I snuck it in here.
3. Michael Franks, “White Boy Lost in the Blues” (New York: BMI, 1973).

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4. Maybe that is why my son is a classical musician today. He picks up gigs playing chamber music in New York City. But he lives in Harlem. And he has to be one of the very few violists who has ever played a gig at The Blue Note—and they don't play classical music at The Blue Note!
 5. Roger Hewitt, *White Talk, Black Talk: Interracial Friendship and Communication Amongst Adolescents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986).
 6. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 89.
 7. Though I'm pleased to say that Ellison's book awakened my then-sixteen year-old daughter in much the same way that *Wretched of the Earth* awakened me.
 8. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove City, 1968); W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (New York: Blue Heron, 1953); Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Modern Library, 1953).
 9. Michael Monahan, "The Conservation of Authenticity: Political Commitment and Racial Reality," *Philosophia Africana* 8, no. 1 (2006), 49.
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