

**Team Teaching Across the Disciplines Grant Proposal**

**Institute for the Arts and Humanities**

**The Pennsylvania State University**

**African American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century**

**Spring 2008**

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**Emily Grosholz, Professor of Philosophy, African-American Studies, and English**

## **Narrative description of course**

Professors Christine Clark-Evans and Emily Grosholz would like to co-teach a course on African American philosophy in the twentieth century in Spring Semester 2008, AAAS / Philosophy 469, and bring it to the attention of the university community by inviting four speakers, each of whom would teach one of the classes and give a public lecture in the evening. This initiative will bring four distinguished African and African-American scholars to Penn State, in the context of a course that examines the important role of philosophy in Africana Studies, and the important methodological and ethical insights that Africans and African Americans have brought to philosophy. The speakers we propose to bring in are Lewis Gordon, Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy at Temple University; Joy A. James, John B. and John T. McCoy Presidential Professor of Africana Studies and College Professor in Political Science at Williams College; Emmanuel Eze, Associate Professor of Philosophy at DePaul University; and Harvey Cormier, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York / Stony Brook. We also hope to bring in five of our colleagues with special expertise to teach one class each. Deborah Atwater and Robyn Spencer will speak on the role of women in this philosophical and political tradition, Major Coleman and James Stewart on recent debates about the concept of race, and Thomas Poole on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. We also hope to borrow another speaker from the Philosophy Department series, Eugene Garver, whose recent book *For the Sake of Argument* treats the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Professors Clark-Evans and Grosholz co-taught this course once before when it was an experimental course, and are eager to enhance its first presentation as an official course that indicates renewed and productive relations among their departments. We would like the Penn State community to

welcome this new course, and the ideas and debates it will spark. The proposed speakers from other institutions and their evening lectures will be an important part of this publicity. Lewis Gordon works in the area of Africana philosophy, phenomenology, and social and political theory, and is especially concerned with theories of race and philosophies of liberation: he is the Director of the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought at Temple University. One of his numerous books, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (1997) won the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award for the Study of Human Rights in North America. Joy A. James is active in various human rights groups for political prisoners, and has edited several anthologies on incarceration in the United States, most recently *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (SUNY Press, 2004). She is currently studying the role of women in the Civil Rights movement. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze specializes in African philosophical thought and social and political theory, with an emphasis on postcolonial thought, theories of race, and human rights. His most recent book *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* was published by Routledge in 2001. Harvey Cormier writes on Cornel West's pragmatism, Kant, and Marx, with a special interest in debates over the concept of race. His book *The Truth is What Works, or, Pragmatism and the Seed of Death* was published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2000.

Reading works by African American philosophers (some of whom respond to other works by American, European and African thinkers), students will examine debates over the definition of race, ethnicity, and citizenship, and study how these philosophers assess the rule of law and the use of force in twentieth century America. Since all these works refer to the concrete and problematic situation of African Americans, they raise with special urgency the issue of how philosophical reflection can address social change. When a philosopher makes his or her lived experience (or 'situation' to use Beauvoir's term) as an African American a theme for philosophical reflection, it changes the conception of

philosophical method in deep and interesting ways. It also marks out an intellectual and political space at the center of philosophical research for the thinker, who thereby rejects a marginalization that is widespread and unjust.

Our course engages twentieth century African American philosophy, from Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*, and Ida B. Wells' *Southern Horrors*, to King's *Why We Can't Wait*, Davis's *Women, Race and Class*, and Boxill's *Blacks and Social Justice*. The books refer back to both liberal democratic and socialist philosophical treatises, as well as theological and jurisprudential writings, in order to construct new conceptions of race, citizenship, freedom, and the rule of law. Moreover, they are all grounded in the concrete, problematic situation of African Americans in twentieth century America, so that they raise with special urgency the question of how philosophical reflection can address social change. In classroom debate, students will rediscover and critically examine how the history of racial strife and reconciliation affects local, national and international civic life. One constant feature of this course is that white students and students of color become aware of differing perspectives that are hard to reconcile; this helps them to re-examine their own social identities and those of their classmates. When the course is team-taught (with one white faculty member and one faculty member of color) the same dynamic occurs between the instructors: watching them reconcile their views in discussion and pedagogy helps the students as well.

This cross-listed course (in AAAS and Philosophy) will also help students understand racial strife and reconciliation in the United States within a broader philosophical context, where America is heir to and transformative of European liberal democratic and socialist ideas about citizenship, freedom and the rule of law. Twentieth century political ideals of autonomy, social justice and democracy drive not only the American civil rights movement, but also globally a host of anti-colonialist movements. As Locke and Rousseau reacted to the excesses of monarchy in England and France, and Thoreau to the

domination of wealth and custom in New England, so Du Bois and King in America and Fanon and Mandela in Africa opposed white hegemony. The cultural cross-currents are essential for understanding both the course of philosophy and the course of history. Students will be required to critically analyze, in discussion and short essays, each of the books we study. This a process that will culminate in a well-researched 12-15 page final paper on a topic developed in consultation with the professors. Each student will give an oral presentation of a draft of their paper during the final month of the semester, and revise and expand it on the basis of class discussion.

This course is designed for AAAS and Philosophy majors and minors, but is also open to students from other disciplines who would like to broaden their understanding of modern philosophy in relation to twentieth century politics, with a focus on racial issues. For philosophy majors, the course provides an important chance to examine philosophical method and the way it can bring abstract thought and concrete situation, as well as argument and narrative, into novel conjunction. For AAAS majors, it offers an important introduction to the history of ideas and the role of theoretical reflection in social activism, as well as the impact that focusing on the lived situation of the philosopher can have on philosophical method. For history majors, French majors, and English majors, it offers a centrally important case study in the development of the liberal democratic and socialist traditions, as well as the crises of colonialism. It offers all students experience with constructing and analyzing arguments, which is the ethical heart of effective rhetoric.

African American philosophers and social activists have produced important texts that both take their place in the philosophical canon and revise the canon and indeed how we understand the practice of philosophy. Ida B. Wells, for example, was best known as a journalist and publisher who launched an anti-lynching campaign at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and consequently was a founding member of the NAACP. But she should also be read as a philosopher, because her writings express a coherent and

novel view of the relation between principles and social reality that had not only practical but important theoretical impact. Her internationalism, like that of Du Bois, transformed the view of African Americans at the level of national and international policy during a decisive moment in United States history. Du Bois consistently urged us to reflect on the structural similarities between international colonialism and racism at home, and inquired into the parallels between African Americans, Africans, and the peoples of India. Both Wells and Du Bois argued that if America is to emerge as a world power and defender of the freedom and liberties of others, then the status of African Americans must be reconsidered and radically altered.

### **Preliminary Course Syllabus**

**Week 1.** Introduction to philosophical texts written by African Americans, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Alain Locke, Martin Luther King, Jr., Angela Davis, Bernard Boxill, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Lewis Gordon, Patricia Hill Collins; as well as texts to which they respond, including some written by Thoreau, William James, Jean-Paul Sartre, Reinhold Niebuhr, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Nelson Mandela. We will trace the themes of social justice and citizenship, practical deliberation and the rule of law, and the evolving definition of the concept of race.

**Weeks 2 and 3.** The debate between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington articulates issues about economic and political autonomy, the definition of race and double consciousness, and the “Talented Tenth.” It also brings into focus the meaning of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, in relation to the African American population. Du Bois also rekindles debate on the nature of ‘race.’ **Professor Cormier will speak on these issues.**

**Weeks 4 and 5.** Ida B. Wells plays a leading role in the establishment of the NAACP, which is based on opposition to the practice of lynching and the threat it poses to the rule of law, and like the newly

inaugurated national and international congresses aims to forge a new sense of citizenship, entitlement, and civil rights. **Professor Deborah Atwater / Professor Robyn Spencer (PSU) will speak on these issues.**

**Weeks 6 and 7.** Like Gandhi and Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. takes his inspiration from Thoreau's "Letter on Civil Disobedience" as well as the writings of the theologian Niebuhr, and forges a new political method for addressing social injustice. **Professor Thomas Poole (PSU) will speak on these issues.**

**Weeks 8 and 9.** Mandela in his long imprisonment develops a non-pacifist version of civil disobedience that eventually blossoms into a largely non-violent revolution in South Africa. Senghor uses the French Enlightenment and its appeal to reason in politics to guide his country, and this in turn alters our conception of reason. **Professor Eze will speak on these issues.**

**Weeks 10 and 11.** Two philosophical studies of Brown vs. Board of Education (Boxill) and of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Garver). **Professor Garver (St. Johns) will speak on these issues.**

**Weeks 12 and 13.** A reconsideration of gender issues by African American women philosophers like Davis, Collins, and others. How the exclusion of women weakens the movement for racial equality and the exclusion of African Americans weakens the feminist movement. What is to be done? **Professor James will speak on these issues.**

**Week 14.** The new debates over race; how do new developments in molecular biology bear on the question? What light do they throw on Du Bois's celebrated definition of race, and the "scientific" racism of the early twentieth century? **Professor Major Coleman / Professor James Stewart (PSU) will speak on these issues.**

**Week 15.** Parallels and differences between the American civil rights movement and anti-colonial movements in Africa. Lewis Gordon brings Fanon and Sartre to bear on the contemporary situation. **Professor Gordon will speak on these issues.**