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## Identity: Cultural Knowledge--Self-knowledge. *disClosure* interviews Linda Alcoff

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*Ann M. Ciasullo, Christine R. Metzso, and Jeffery L. Nicholas*

**Identity: Cultural knowledge—  
self-knowledge**

*disClosure interviews Linda Alcoff*

Linda Alcoff, Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professor for Teaching Excellence at Syracuse University, visited the University of Kentucky in March 1997 as part of the Spring lecture series sponsored by the Committee on Social Theory. In a talk entitled "What Should White People Do?" she explored the costs of acknowledging white privilege. In response to the psychological threats white people feel from this acknowledgment, there is a backlash. Dr. Alcoff posed and attempted to answer the question of how to avoid this white backlash. She suggests the recreation of racial identity is needed and begins to explore exactly how this could be done through the recognition of our location in a community.

Dr. Alcoff is the author of *Real Knowing*, numerous articles on feminist epistemology and raced and gendered identities, co-editor of *Feminist Epistemologies*, and co-editor (with Robyn Wiegman) of *Who Can Speak?*, a book on the problems of claiming identity. She is currently working on a collection of essays on race and personal identity entitled *Visible Identities*.

In the following interview, the disClosure collective probes the metaphysical and epistemological beliefs which inform Alcoff's work on identity, especially racialized identities. Alcoff makes a place for herself in the debates surrounding race and identity by drawing on tra-

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ditions in Western philosophy coming out of Hegel and Marx, the critique of that tradition by the Frankfurt School thinkers and postmodernist thinkers (especially Foucault), epistemological thought of Hilary Putnam and others, and her own experience of mixed race origins. She discusses the importance of community and recognition for the restructuring of dialogues on race, the need to maintain affirmative action programs, and the complexity of our racial identification systems, especially with regard to the visible markers which denote racial identities.

**disClosure:** Yesterday at your talk you discussed how individuals need some kind of group identity to achieve a personal identity. That seems somewhat communitarian, but communitarian politics are generally considered conservative. What do you think the relationship is between communitarian politics and your goals for group and personal identity? By communitarian we mean people like Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor (although Taylor is not conservative). The conservative classification is derived from MacIntyre. The idea is that if you want to give some prominence to the community, then the community outweighs the individual, and liberalism, according to John Rawls, is based on the inviolability of the individual over society.

**Linda Alcoff:** But the individual is constituted by the society, so it seems to me that Rawls' view rests on a metaphysical error. I think MacIntyre was right; I think where I differ with MacIntyre, for example in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, is on the notion that Christianity is the privileged discourse. But his ties to Christianity don't seem to me to be entailed by his account of tradition, the importance of tradition and community and history, and the relationship between reason and history. So I think you really can't ask the question of whether we should pay attention to personal, individual identity or group identity because they're mutually constituted. So, it's incoherent to start the question in that way.

The question has to be, what kind of social discourse in community and institutions and the public arena do we want to create (to the extent we can create one) that will constitute individuals in the best way, the most egalitarian, the most liberating way possible, that will constitute individuals as having the capacity for the most democratic participation in the society and the public discourse. And I think that to do that, to engender the ability for an individual to participate in a moral project, does require a connection to a past and a present community. Individuals don't survive their own lives, but communities do last beyond the individual; so if you feel connected to a community you will have an investment in the future, whereas the liberal market society ab-

stracts everything to the narrow individual concerns. This is metaphysically wrong, and also then you don't have any concern about the seven generations beyond, as they say you should be concerned about. I'm thinking about environmental issues—why should you have an investment in the environment? If I don't have any connection to a community, to a race or an ethnicity or a nation or culture, I'll just try to make a lot of money and buy a lot of things.

**dC:** Do you think that your position on this question, that there is a connection between the individual and the community, and that they're both mutually constituting, is something that develops out of your peculiar background as partly Latino? Might there then be a larger sense of community in a typical Latina family than, say, in a Midwestern American family?

**LA:** That's an interesting question. I would say there are two things: one is the theoretical tradition that I work out of, of Hegel and Marx. Individuals engage in praxis, praxis constructs society, society constitutes individual, and that I have found theoretically compelling since I was eighteen. But, secondly, probably I think those of us who are marked in various ways—racially and by gender as well—notice the ways in which these group identity configurations affect issues of distribution of epistemic authority and credibility. Notions about how rationality is connected to identity are at work in discourses and practices in a way that is embedded and implicit and invisible to others. Not that every person of color has that knowledge and perspective, but it provides an experience that can be tapped into when other occasions—like theory, which is only one of them—make it possible to tap into that.

**dC:** This sounds like a very theory-based academic project, and one of things we were wondering in reading your essays is how do you suggest we begin extending this dialogue to the greater community, the non-academic community?

**LA:** Well, we have limited power and limited control. The market forces are on the upsurge; we're at a period of retreat, I think—with the attacks on multiculturalism and political correctness. There were a number of sixties intellectuals who went into the universities and produced social criticism. The result of that was this very well-orchestrated but widely dispersed attack on social criticism, and the social reconstruction projects coming out of the academy push us back. So we're in a period of retreat. But clearly the dialogue is already being extended outside the academic community. Race is getting talked about all over the place, on NPR, MacNeil/Lehrer, Charlie Rose; Cornell West is on the TV every other week, the Rodney King incident, also the uprisings in St. Petersburg, Florida—things that continue to happen. I think that given the disparities of wealth in this country and the way that these

disparities are grouped around race, there are going to continue to be uprisings and rebellions. That to me is inevitable and will increase with the reductions of welfare. Given that, there will be some public discourse trying to make sense of these events and give meaning and interpretation, and I have been impressed with how the public arenas have made more of an effort to include African-American cultural theorists. I get frustrated because it's still black and white. The L.A. rebellions were so mischaracterized, as if it were simply black and white, when the majority of people who were arrested were Latinos, and there were a number of Asians involved in a different way. That discussion didn't get into the national arena. So it's already happening to a large extent, and what we can do is develop courses. I developed a course on race and identity—my colleagues looked a little bit askance—what does this have to do with philosophy?—but there is philosophical work now on race. So I developed this course, and I want to make it a regular part of the curriculum. Most of my students will not stay in the academy—we have a lot of journalism students at Syracuse University, so my hope is that these ideas will percolate in the rest of the society.

**dC:** In terms of courses, how would you suggest incorporating into lower level courses some of the ideas in this course that you've developed? For example, I'm teaching Introduction to Ethics this semester, and we did a section on affirmative action. My students just didn't think there was a racism problem any more. I mentioned Texaco, "well that's just an anomaly." So how can we do some consciousness-raising at that level?

**LA:** You have to give them statistics. I give sheets of statistics, and they say, "Where'd you get these statistics?" and I say, "The US Government," and they still say—they're so sophisticated now—"oh, well, you can produce statistics to show anything." But you have to make the effort, and it does open their eyes to the fact that some of the economic disparities between blacks and whites are getting worse. If you scour around, there are some fairly accessible essays that can be used in class as well. The students are often initially resistant, but I think the way pedagogy works is that you say something to them that they're unfamiliar with or hostile to, and immediately defense mechanisms come up and they resist. But a week later, a month later, you find out that you did have an effect; so you can't take that initial total rejection as necessarily the end point of your effect as a teacher. Thankfully.

**dC:** A moment ago you were talking about the L.A. riots and how they were misrepresented in the media as a black/white issue. We were wondering how we can bring to the public dialogue the realization, the understanding that race is not just a black/white issue, that there's much more to race. It's certainly not going to be easy, but what would

you suggest outside of teaching students who go to college and take courses?

**LA:** Well, we have to use every arena available; that's why I think the curriculum reforms that have been targeting public schools are so important. There was a very good one in New York state that I was very impressed with, that my kids have been through, but that has been under attack. People who decide to teach high school are heroes in my book. Not just high school, but elementary and junior high school. We need to use journalistic forums also—I think that as academics this is our site; I disagree with those who say it's the central site of political change, but it is an important site. And I think we would do best to use our own particular skills and proclivities—we need to write books, need to write essays, and in our courses we need to use the books and essays that are being written.

**dC:** So would you say that the role of the intellectual is basically confined to the academic setting, to the university? And this is in relation also to writing books; most of the books, at least those that we philosophers write, are unfortunately not for general use, right? We're not writing *Candide* anymore. Do you think that we should change that, and if so, how? And can we get respect from other philosophers if we do?

**LA:** Right, we have limited power over how we can change it; Susan Bordo and I talked about this all the time, because she really wanted to write more popular, accessible books, and so did I. Then, by the time you get through tenure, all these years of academic writing, you don't know how to write anything else! You can't write a good sentence anymore! But clearly, there are people who are doing it; there are public intellectuals who have been talked about a lot—Henry Louis Gates writes regularly in the *New Yorker*; it's still an elite venue, but it's a wider venue. Noam Chomsky is another one. I did a five-day series of lectures for the Unitarian Universalists last summer on feminism—we need to take all those opportunities that we can to speak to larger groups.

The other thing that, in terms of political strategy, is really key and what has not existed in this country that has existed in other countries—certainly in Latin America—is the possibilities of dialogue and teamwork between the labor movement and academics. The labor movement in this country represents several millions of people, mostly working class, increasingly large percentages of women and peoples of color; and the movement is really changing and has developed better leadership in creating a political agenda independent of the Democratic party. There was a big meeting in New York City in the fall called The Academy and The Labor Movement; AFL-CIO and other labor leaders came, plus Robin Kelly and all these intellectuals came; it was very exciting because they had this big auditorium, and two thousand more

people came than could fit in the auditorium, and they had to set up sound speakers outside on the sidewalk. So it seems as if this is a moment in which that rapprochement could begin. Similar meetings are being organized around the country.

There are going to be political differences, there's going to be distrust. The labor movement has lots of bad history, and academics tend to be elitist, so it's going to take work: but I'm very excited about this development, and I agree with the intellectuals there who said, "we want to be a resource for this new progressive, labor movement; we want you to tell us what kind of work will be helpful." And that's what I think we should be doing. Not to follow the party wherever it tells us to go, but to link up with this movement that is happening and that is the most exciting thing happening in this country now. And it's multicultural and multiracial and based in the working classes.

*race and identity*

dC: How is a positive construction of mixed-race identity going to be pertinent to what we've just been discussing, and do you do this with a further political goal in mind? Namely, is it a step towards some future time when we can eradicate all racial divides altogether, or are racial categories still useful, and how long will they continue to be useful?

LA: I don't know that we can see that far down the road as to whether racial identification will or should wither away. I think it's too early; I think that there's so much work still to be done to deepen people's understanding of how race affects thinking and experience and politics.

dC: So, in other words, you advocate talking about race for our present cultural and societal situation?

LA: I think we need to explore how so many of the neutral concepts and practices of community, of rationality, of liberty and of individualism, might be subtly encoded with racial practices. Like community and individual and liberty, what is taken as absolutely reasonable and rational in white communities is just not the practice in many communities of color, and then they get classified as irrational. Like some of the studies I've seen about how, say, Latinos will give their whole savings to a relative who needs it, even when that relative isn't a good risk, shall we say. And it's like, from the mainstream perspective, this is irrational behavior, why would you do this? But there's a different sense of these basic notions of what you do and who you are, and what your obligations are. And I think those things are deeply embedded in and are thought of as neutral political discourse. We need to have a long period of self-reflection and investigation of the ways in which race, among other things, permeates us and our institutions in so many ways. The positive reconstruction of mixed race identity is certainly important for

those of us who experience this problem, you know, the "tragic mulatto." And I do believe that arguing against purity could have larger implication because it's connected to authenticity and the notions of borders and boundaries and so forth. I'm not saying we have to get rid of racial identifications but of purist ones.

dC: Do you think then that acknowledging some of these categories is a means through which we can redefine notions of community or identity?

LA: Yes and I certainly would want to say the racial categories need to be reconceived. The current concepts need to be problematized to see that we're all fluid and hybrid in all kinds of ways and mutually interpolated and constituted. So I don't think acknowledging the importance of racial categories means "white people can only talk about white things" or something like that, but it will show the ways in which categories do figure into identity.

dC: In a related question then, what do you think of affirmative action programs?

LA: Well I think they're vitally important, and they have been terribly misrepresented. I think they were misrepresented as nonuniversalist because of the claim that they're extending a privilege to one sector of the population over and above other sectors of the population. Actually, what they're trying to do is to equalize—so critics assume that before affirmative action we were starting from a level playing field, and then what affirmative action does is it takes people of color or women and it puts them at an overlook and gives them an advantage. But of course we were initially starting from a non-level playing field, and affirmative action is actually trying to equalize, and thus, in a sense, universalize the starting point for all people. This explanation doesn't get taken up by the media very much though.

dC: (Ann) Or in the classroom I think. Like Jeffery, I taught affirmative action too, and students have really set ideas that it is wrong and it's bad—exactly what you said: it goes against everything that our country stands for—very strong beliefs about it.

(Christine) Reverse discrimination.

(Jeffery) What was interesting in my class is that I had two African-American students who were both against affirmative action. One of them did a presentation, and she said that she would rather be hired for her qualifications than for being black. And I said, how often are we hired for our qualifications? And they seemed to think that we're hired for our qualifications all the time.

LA: Yeah, I've struggled with this one personally. I didn't get my job initially because of affirmative action, although I think gender might have come into it. On another occasion I was given this award and

somebody said I received it because of affirmative action, and I just felt like, oh, god, this is so awful. So I know that it can have that effect. But I'd say two things: some people argue that we shouldn't support it because it won't reduce white racism; white people will just see every person of color in the workplace as only there because of affirmative action. But I think that's a mistake in argument to blame affirmative action for that; really, the problem there is the white racist interpretation of the situation as meaning that the person wasn't qualified. Affirmative action isn't foolproof immediately, but I believe in the idea of integration—you see people living with you or going to school with you or working with you and your racist assumptions break down. And the other thing I'd say is that I've talked with friends of mine who also have had affirmative action involved in attaining their jobs, and it's a personal, psychologically hard thing to think about and deal with. But a really good friend of mine who got a good job through a special hiring told me that his view is that it gave him the opportunity to get his foot in the door so that he could do his work. And he's doing really incredibly important work on race and philosophy. So he helped me to accept it as an opportunity to do the work that I believe is important.

*the critique of enlightenment*

**dc:** To shift gears slightly: a moment ago you said arguing against purity has all kinds of further implications, including how we talk about reason. We questioned whether the concept of reason, because it's white, is salvageable, and if so, how do we salvage the concept of reason while arguing against purity at the same time?

**LA:** I definitely think the concept of reason is salvageable. As for the Enlightenment—I think you have to have a two-sided analysis of the Enlightenment, which Adorno and Horkheimer had (particularly the introduction to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). And Foucault also has this in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" in which he defends the project of increasing self-reflectiveness. So there are ways in which these more radical, deep projects which critique reason are also continuous with it. Now, the thing about reason is that the ways in which it is normally understood today in philosophy and elsewhere—it's not so much that the current understanding is entirely wrong and useless. Rather, it needs to be located and specified, which is what Adorno and Horkheimer do, and which is what Habermas does. I know there are problems with Habermas, but I think that something very useful about Habermas, especially in the context of philosophical discussions, is his notion that there are different kinds of rationalities. The mistake has been to collapse all of them into this one based on prediction, control, and abstract reasoning, and to see that as the only form of reason. Such

a collapse has all kinds of deleterious political effects. However, if we understand that abstract reasoning has limited utility, and is not the only form of reason, then it is not so pernicious. It would require giving up the universalist pretensions of that form of reason, and this would require a very different self-understanding of that form of reason. So to some extent it would shake the foundation for that notion of reason, but I think that the way to move forward, to salvage reason, is on the one hand to recognize that abstract form of reason as having limited utility and to talk about the multiple forms of reason as Habermas does. Habermas claims that there's a reason that's involved with the need for prediction and control, which we have the need for as human beings; there's a reason that's involved in communication; and there's a reason that's involved in liberation. And they have different methodologies. That's one way to salvage reason.

The other way that's very important is to repair the split between reason and its others that was made in ancient Greece on the basis of the rejection of rhetoric and sophistry, and in philosophy this split, at least when I was in grad school, was the reigning dogma. According to this dogma, all of the rhetorical elements of the text, and the desire and power that are in the text, are left outside of the analysis, and we reduce the text to its referential content, and we set up oppositions, and we assess their logical relationships and that's the entirety of the meaning of the text. But texts always have these other kinds of textual elements, and I think, like Michele LeDoeuff, that those other elements actually do philosophical work; they don't simply obscure meaning and throw up obfuscations. They're actually part of reason; they are part of rationality in the sense of judgment. We're very early in the stages of doing this reconceptualization of reason. There have been really good critiques of reason in this century, starting with Nietzsche who said that what's wrong with the dogma is that it takes as the essence of the real that which is an abstraction from the real. So you have this full-bodied, concrete lived experience or a full text, with rhetoric, desire and power all in it, and you abstract from that these propositions that then can be analytically taken apart—this is what logic does—and you then take that as the essential reality of the world, of the text, but it's not. It's an abstraction from the real. So there's a kind of lying going on, and Nietzsche said, of course, logic lies, and I agree. But it's not that logic's useless, right? It's that it is doing a certain kind of thing, a certain kind of task; but as philosophers, I think we need to develop ways to deal with texts in their fuller reality and to deal with arguments in their fuller reality as do Habermas, LeDoeuff, and feminist epistemologies. We need to borrow ideas from literary theory or from post-structuralism on how to read the multiple layers of a text; we need to develop

ways to do normative critique, to do epistemic critique, but ones that will bring in all these multiple layers.

**dC:** So you would say, then, that Foucault is trying to repair the split between reason and its other?

**LA:** Yes, very much so.

**dC:** And that Horkheimer and Adorno and Habermas are trying to recognize the limited utility of Enlightenment reason and that it's not the only form of reason?

**LA:** I think Horkheimer and Adorno are mostly providing a critique. Horkheimer does some methodological reconstructive work, but mostly they're providing a critique of Enlightenment reason. Foucault is also offering a way to begin a fuller analysis of how reason actually operates in the world and history. And Habermas has also got this reconstructive project. In actuality, there is no incommensurability between any of these forms of discourse or forms of reason, and MacIntyre, among others, makes this argument. When you begin to talk about things like "white reason," it does sound as if you're going to lead to a situation in which we can't talk to each other. The reason why that's not the case is that in this increasingly global world, none of our worlds are incommensurable—even, I think, between historical periods. Incommensurability really means that there's no element in common. And if you have at least one element in common, then you can begin to work from that to have dialogue. So I think this is a more accurate description of the situation that we're in. And that's why absolute relativism is not really a danger. There's still the difficulty of adjudicating conflict between different positions, and it's a tremendous difficulty, but I think by problematizing the dominant Western conception of reason, we're going to have a better chance of doing that. Rather than saying that there is this one standard and you don't meet it, so therefore, I don't have to explore the coherence of your system and your thinking.

**dC:** So, do you think the whole debate over incommensurability, which arose out of social science studies and anthropology, has been misguided?

**LA:** Yes, I wrote my master's thesis on Kuhn, and I think that the more historicist philosophies of science, Lakatos and others, are much better. Kuhn himself didn't really mean incommensurability and he tried to retract it. I think, though that part of what is motivating that claim is this other problem, namely how absolute relativism is detrimental to intersubjective relations—if you have an incommensurability situation, you have to have absolute relativism, because you don't have a clue about the validity of beliefs in other paradigms. Hilary Putnam makes the argument that that kind of position cannot lead to real respect for

others. If I believe that you have a view that I can't possibly understand, I will tolerate your views, but if I can't possibly understand you, then my tolerance for your views is based on a kind of Kantian duty-following, devoid of affect. And it certainly doesn't motivate me to try to understand your views. Whereas if you think that you and I share reality in some way and also share some discursive traditions, which I believe that of course we do, then you are motivated to try to make as much sense as you can of the other's position. And that is much better than this kind of empty, dutiful tolerance of the other. Following Wittgenstein actually in this argument, Putnam says that you can't even see the other as a self or as a subject on such a view, because you can't really understand them as operating in the way that you yourself do. The reason I say that may be motivating the incommensurability argument is that when the West begins to realize its own Eurocentrism, and that maybe other cultures are not all inferior to us in reason, democracy and cultural values, it's actually an easier position to move to absolute relativism at that point, because then you can say, "okay, maybe the universal teleology we accepted wasn't right (this is what Richard Rorty says) but we Europeans have our traditions, and we are within those traditions and we can't know the other traditions, but that's okay." Such a view doesn't require an engagement with the other, and I think that might be motivating some people who are attracted to incommensurability. It's easier for European, Anglo discourses to move to relativism than to follow the implications of the critique of Eurocentrism.

**dC:** The problem of incommensurability consists of how one rationality can critique another. MacIntyre says in *Whose Justice?* that a particular tradition cannot critique itself from inside, so this leads to the question, if African American culture is different from white culture, how can the one understand the other? So your answer to that would be that because we share the same reality...

**LA:** Well, also, our traditions are enmeshed...

**dC:** ...in the history itself...

**LA:** ...Yeah, part of what the Eurocentric discourses have done is to erase, of course, all the ways in which they have been affected by, influenced by, other cultures and other ideas. I think obviously African-American culture is a hybrid negotiation of different traditions. And Latin American as well. To say "share the same reality" sounds like there's this uninterpreted reality out there, and I don't want to give that impression. We share the same reality in that we have to live together and we negotiate a practical environment.

**dC:** Would you say that it is impossible for the two cultures not to understand each other because they are not created in a vacuum, they can-

not separate themselves from other cultures because those cultures have contributed to their creation?

LA: Right. Partial misunderstandings are of course possible but total misunderstandings are not.

*cinema-scope*

dC: Have you seen the movie *A Time To Kill*?

LA: Yes, that movie is an interesting contrast with *Dances With Wolves*.<sup>2</sup> It has the same subplot: white attempt to incorporate the lessons of anti-racism. This white lawyer, Jake, wants to be on the right side, but he undergoes some criticism when Carl Lee (the black defendant) says "you're the bad guy." So the movie is a process of Jake coming to terms with racism and with what it means for his own identity. But white superiority is totally recuperated in the final scene in that Carl Lee learns from Jake. Jake is vindicated in the end as the color-blind white liberal, so that he doesn't have to do the kind of soul-searching or self-transformation that Kevin Costner does in *Dances*. In this sense *A Time To Kill* is worse. Jake uses a universalist, color-blind rhetoric at the beginning and it's left intact at the end of the movie.

dC: Carl Lee seems to be saying that there is a certain incommensurability, for Jake keeps saying, "oh, we're a great team," and Carl Lee says "no we're not." And in that movie their histories are enmeshed.

LA: I didn't see it in terms of incommensurability or not, but in terms of universalism or group identity. And Carl Lee saying no, group identity is relevant here and the notion that we can transcend that to a universal plane is not going to work. And Jake is pushing for the universalism. You can reject that universalism without being committed to an incommensurability. We are positioned differently, and different social locations have a tremendous effect in all kinds of ways, but we are positioned differently within this shared history/framework, so we also share a lot of traditions and parts of ourselves.

LA: Did you see *The English Patient*? It's a movie that takes as its theme national identities and national allegiances and suggests that these are essentially unreal and pernicious. The movie contrasts geographical landscapes—that are filmed so beautifully—and the landscapes of the body, showing their similarity: they are complex, unique, individual, only inadequately captured by names, borders, identities. The English patient, the hero, is set up as this romantic figure: a Hungarian count, educated in England, member of the Royal Geographical Society, someone who respects no national allegiances but on his deathbed is ironically misidentified only as "English." So he is someone who resists borders, exploring caves and artifacts, learning a great deal about Arab culture, pursuing knowledge as if for its own sake.

dC: So he's the character of universalism?

LA: He is seen in a way as universal, as exemplifying this border crossing, but also, I think his role represents a certain variant of postmodernism. He symbolizes always an individual, a man who doesn't want to be named even, because of the way a name will locate and constrain him. His philosophy is to be simply an individual of the world, he doesn't believe in getting married, in possessing others, in putting boundaries around human relationships. And he conducts himself accordingly in the movie in both his private and public life, at one point allying with the Nazis, at another point with their enemies. Well, all of this falls apart and mayhem results, and we see that this attempt to escape identity tragically fails, but I think the audience is led throughout the movie to believe that his approach is right even if unworkable, and that these national allegiances people feel are important are really not (as he says at one point, "You ally with the Nazis and they kill a thousand people; you ally against them and the other side kills a thousand people; in any case a thousand people will die"). What's so insidious about this movie is that we see the borders and boundaries of Egypt penetrated by these European archaeologists; we see the boundaries of women and their relationships penetrated and broken down, but the borders of "jolly old England" are never even shown, much less penetrated. So there is this Hungarian count, an aristocratic male, breaking down borders because they get in his way in the European quest for knowledge. So the borders of the Third World are in the way, the identity categories are in the way, and these get transgressed in the movie, while the borders of England and the borders and hierarchies of class and gender are left intact!

*positionality and personal identity*

dC: As a follow up to your discussion of *The English Patient*, you seem to be advocating a position in your work which sits somewhere between essentialism and universalism on the one hand and postmodernist relativism on the other. You seem not to want to advocate either side of that divide, but rather you seem to occupy a space that is situated between them. Where do you see yourself in this debate and how do you avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and relativism?

LA: I do want to avoid essentialism. I even want to avoid strategic essentialism. I don't think that's a coherent position. I developed a concept of positionality in a paper I wrote several years ago and which I am developing further in *Visible Identities*. There I was suggesting that we think about gender identity in terms of its position in a social space rather than any inherent characteristics so that you can think about what it means to be a woman and what the meaning of woman is not in



terms of some internal, core attributes that all women share—which leads you into essentialism—but in terms of shared social location and structured space, thus it's positionality. In this way you can understand that your social status is based not on your internal attributes but on your relations in this social space. And so, for example, white women's social status changes vis-a-vis who we're interacting with as we move through a social landscape; I was trying to develop this concept of positionality so that we can still talk about identity and the importance of social location but in a way that will not ultimately refer back to some essential core.

dC: It also seems to avoid that free-flowing, relative identity of post-structuralism.

LA: Yes, there is a structured grid within which we're operating, which is open and fluid itself, and changing, but certainly not open to individual, voluntaristic kinds of action

dC: So the locations themselves change, but it's not like we can't ever grab onto one of them in order to meet as a group?

LA: You know, I think we are (always already) located, and that can be the way to articulate a commonality between women rather than based on some internal core. That's what I was trying to move toward: that vis-a-vis men in every society we're positioned in some similar ways. We can avoid relativism by understanding the importance of social location. So it isn't that we can grab onto locations, but that we are located. We have agency in that there are different approaches we can take in response to that location, and there's a range of things that we can choose to do and moves that we can make.

dC: Those moves are really important feminism, where the notion of "woman" itself has been challenged. Many feminist endeavors have been criticized by women of color and by lesbians for assuming that there is a universal subject or an essential woman; such criticisms have shown that this essential woman is not universal at all, but rather is aligned with white, middle-class, heterosexual ideas.

LA: In "Cultural Feminism vs. Postmodernism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," I'm looking at cultural feminism, which is the essentialism view, and postmodernism, which is what I called a nominalist account of identity in the philosophical sense, and which erases really important parts of identity. I try to work between those two positions.

I think performative accounts of identity tend toward relativism, and toward a kind of idealist account that focuses too much at the level of cultural representation and discourse and away from bodies and material reality. We need a more materialist, a more physical engagement with the flesh and body. Toward such an account, what can be very useful is Merleau-Ponty's work and phenomenology that is

reconfigured away from universalism. That's what I am trying to do in *Visible Identities*, to use a Merleau-Pontian approach to offer a phenomenology of the raced body and the gendered body. I think this moves away from the problem of voluntarism and relativism because we are located in these inscribed bodies. It is also related to reason in that reason is related to the body, but what that means, of course, we are just beginning to flesh out.

*postmodernism and feminism*

dC: Have you read *Volatile Bodies*? In it, Elizabeth Grosz uses Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari to develop a corporeal feminism. How do you think one could bring in postmodernism to make a more corporeal, material philosophy?

LA: Well, I think that book, more than Butler's work, has bodies in it. I think it's fascinating. Generally, though, I don't think we're going to get a corporeal or materialist account from postmodernism. I'm not as optimistic about Deleuze and nomadic positionality as Liz is, for reasons that I gave in the critique of *The English Patient*. I think you get a posturing of nomadism in *The English Patient* that collapses back to the privileged European male identity formation. Although there are lots of incredibly important elements of Deleuze's work, on metaphysical questions in particular, mostly what we get from postmodernism is an internal critique within European-based discourses which has been prompted primarily by the Holocaust, as well as by the self-determination movements in the former colonies. Postmodernism is incredibly important and incredibly useful, but it is located as an internal European critique. I counsel a position with respect to postmodernism, rather than being the acolyte, because I think especially feminism has a tendency toward dutiful following. It takes so much work to master postmodernism that you could spend your whole career trying to make one little move in the language game. Rather, I think like Linda Singer does, for example, that our attitude as feminist theorists and post-colonial theorists should be somewhat autonomous; we should use it when it's useful but not feel a need to be loyal. What often happens between feminism and postmodernism is that feminism gets interrogated by postmodernism. Postmodernism says to feminism, "well you're essentialists over here and you've got a teleology over here," and feminist theory is expected to scurry around and correct itself. But there has not been nearly as much of a feminist critique of postmodernism that's been taken up by postmodernists, so that Linda Singer says it's like the traditional marriage social contract where the wife has to be very faithful, but the husband is not interrogated for his infidelity in the same way.

**dC:** Do you think that French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray in particular, have tried to provide a critique of postmodernism from within the tradition of postmodernism in France?

**LA:** Yes, I think that she is doing critical work that is operating autonomously. Her feminist liberatory project is clearly uppermost, and she will use, for example, psychoanalysis to critique philosophy and philosophy to critique psychoanalysis. But she is one of the only feminist philosophers who is developing theory herself.

**dC:** How has postmodernism contributed to conversations about race? Do you think it has done more harm than good?

**LA:** Well, where it has been good is at the level of analyzing cultural representation. In terms of cultural studies, there have been wonderful studies of cultural representations of others, constructions of others, raced others; for example, Robyn Wiegman's work *American Anatomies* is an incredible analysis. Postmodernism has contributed to an understanding of race in terms of analyzing popular cultural representations. I think in terms of theorizing race in relationship to the self, a project important for philosophy and political theory, there may not be a lot of help from postmodernism. Phenomenology might be more useful here.

*recognition and personal identity*

**dC:** If the recognition of self is necessary for a dialogue on issues of racial identity, what is the relationship between group identity, self-identification and the initiation of practical dialogue on questions of race? You have already addressed how group and self-identity are mutually constructed. How important is that recognition for a practical dialogue?

**LA:** In Hegel, the goal of knowledge and the ultimate outcome of the development of the universal spirit is an absolute coming together of subject and object. There is no excess, there is no supplement, and thus many worry about a kind of totalizing in Hegel which makes him politically problematic. But there is a lot of Hegel which is actually useful. Some people in post-structuralism do these vast critiques of Hegel and dismiss him, but I think that Hegel is right about recognition. And this is a struggle with my students as well; they think "well, if I think I'm a good person, then who cares what society thinks of me. I can just go on about my business." Hegel insists on the need for public recognition, and I think he's right.

**dC:** But you cannot really recognize yourself without the recognition of the group?

**LA:** I think we get our sense of self from how we are seen by the Other. Sartre is right. and he gets it from Hegel. I think as women we may intuit this better because we experience such a disparate number of selves. In the classroom we are given authority and everyone writes

down what we say, but then in a bar or walking down a street, you're a cunt; you have this totally different sense of self.

I find this analysis of recognition compelling, which gets us to visibility, and visibility gets us to gender and race and the ways in which we group categories of identity. And though the ways we group are not true for all times and places, certain ways are very powerful right now. So I think that acknowledging the importance of group identity is necessary in practical dialogue. Iris Young has this kind of argument for affirmative action, for an epistemic credibility or epistemic inclusion in dialogic encounters in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. She thinks that we need to build into the requirements of dialogue in a practical, political encounter, some recognition for these groups, group identities and their effects on reason and effects on judgment, and make sure that marginalized others are included and have a space in some kind of way. This is not to say that you don't criticize people who are different than you. If you don't ever criticize people who are different than you, you are not really respecting them as thinkers. So the point is not to include the voices, and then say yes to whatever they say. That attitude doesn't respect them as thinkers or their ability to engage with your own interpretation of reality. From a position of inclusion, you have to then build in standards of quality and acknowledge that these can be affected by deeply embedded group assumptions and cultural traditions.

**dC:** You mention that recognition gets us to the visible and some would argue that emphasizing the visible, or looking to the visible to talk about race, reinforces and reifies race as visible, that one can look for markers on the body. What would your response be to someone if they said, well, you can't talk about race and the visible?

**LA:** Well, I think that the visible is operating whether we like it or not. I say in "Race and Philosophy" that there is this interplay of perceptual practices and bodily appearance. And there hasn't been very much philosophical attention to this. So paying attention to what is already operating between us is the first task that needs to be done. The worry about reinforcing race may disproportionately come from white people who don't want to see themselves as white because of all that it entails: it's seen as accusatory, or limiting, or you just don't want to have to deal with that history. it's the same as "Well, I didn't own any slaves and it has nothing to do with me," right? So that is where some of the resistance to bringing in the visible originates, because we're all visible. Whiteness is as visible as blackness.

To say that visibility is always involved isn't to say that there is one system of visibility, of the meanings of the visible or the meanings of the visible markers. There are often multiple systems operating even in

the same community, certainly between countries. So I am not bringing in the visible to argue that there is one perceptual system.

**dC:** In your essay "Mestizo Identity" you talk about how people think you are white, and then you say, "oh but I'm part Latino," and then they say, "oh I guess I can see that you have this x, y, or z." And until you told them they had no connection to the visible markers that are not so obvious. It allowed them to read you.

**LA:** Well I would say that part of the problem is that modes of perceiving identity are taught and are culturally specific but this is not acknowledged much in the U.S. My point in the paper was to say that this reaction of people is indicative of the fact that visibility is so important for race, because they feel like "oh, there's got to be some telltale perceptible trace." The Nazis tried to come up with measurements of Jewish facial structures, for example, as shown in the film *Europa Europa*, because there is intense anxiety about border control. It's tied into knowing who is, even knowing whether oneself is of a certain identity. We've got to have these markers. And this indicates how important the visible has been.

**dC:** We have been talking about phenotype the whole time, but we're bothered by how, then, we make sense of classifications of people based on lifestyles, in terms of race. For example African-Americans call other African-Americans white because they have a certain lifestyle, for example, they are Republicans. Or more importantly attitudes and beliefs.

**LA:** I think in that example, when the charge is made, it doesn't say that your race has hanged but that your cultural affiliation has changed. The charge is arguing that your cultural affiliation is not what it should be given your racial identity. It is not going against this visible racial economy; it agrees with it. But I absolutely agree that identity is in fact very complex and all these categories are really inadequate to reality. But there is this tradition in Europe and in the United States of clustering all of these kinds of lifestyles and internal qualities, such as character, and language, to the visible. That there would be some visible marker, essentially race, and all these other things like culture and attributes follow from it.

endnotes

1. Recall the CEO of Texaco who was fired and then turned tapes over to the authorities which were recordings of CEO meetings at Texaco which evidenced racist comments from the CEOs. This led to

charges and indictments against Texaco and its CEOs for discriminatory practices.

2. In her paper, "What Should White People Do?" presented at the University of Kentucky's 9th annual speaker series sponsored by the Committee on Social Theory, Alcoff remarked on the transformation of the character played by Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*.

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