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Rozena Maart in Conversation with Leonard Harris

ROZENA MAART: Can you tell readers a little bit about yourself? Where were you born? How did you become interested in philosophy?

LEONARD HARRIS: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the youngest son of first-generation migrants from a racially segregated south to the industrial north. At a Black college, Central State University, Francis Thomas and Marian Musgrave, my philosophy and English teachers encouraged me. I was a Black hippie, Black power advocate, poet, and generally lost.

ROZENA MAART: What stood out during your university years that made you realise that you had a path to carve for yourself within philosophy?

LEONARD HARRIS: Nothing. Francis Thomas told me that they needed a Negro at Miami University to go to graduate school in philosophy, and he picked me. Miami decided to admit a Negro to the historically all-White school, and I was the experiment.

ROZENA MAART: What led you to this particular path, where you address and then went on to develop a philosophy born of struggle?

LEONARD HARRIS: An accident, I think. My Master's Thesis at the University of Miami was 'Justification of Revolutionary Violence'. The University of Miami had no idea that was coming when they admitted me. It started with 'I do not come with timeless truths', by Franz Fanon. I passed all the classes where we had to study European philosophers, but I rarely used them in my thesis save for Marx and Voltaire; otherwise, Fanon, Stokely Carmichael, etc. That was in 1970.

ROZENA MAART: Let me ask you about Part I of the collection: 'Philoso-

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phy begins with a full range of human experiences (including genocide, slavery, exploitation, misery, degradation, cognitive dissonance, cynicism, etc.). This philosophy, born of struggle, should help people assess their situation and facilitate the mitigation of struggles and misery, the actual experiences of surviving human populations'. This quote comes from the Editor's introduction of the Reader. I remember reading this from your earlier text, *PHILOSOPHY BORN OF STRUGGLE: ANTHOLOGY OF AFRO-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY FROM 1917* (1983), long before I met you. It had a huge impact on me. Can you tell us a little about the move from the collection you edited, mentioned above, and the start of the annual conference, 'Philosophy Born of Struggle?'

LEONARD HARRIS: This question I can answer because it was a particular day: I left the Asylum – the crazy house where philosophy is defined as ethereal, objective, inert properties such as getting privileged access to truth. I was living in a one-bedroom apartment with a wife and child in Washington DC., working a temporary teaching job about to come to an end. The poetic words of Fredrick Douglas, the abolitionist, spoke to me, 'Let me give you the word of the philosophy of reform ... struggle ...'. Here, where we are. Misery exists. Walk unmoored by traditions that say ignore the range of human experiences and disappear into a mental world of eternal truth, ok, be born, jump into the void, and this is where philosophy begins. Nothing mysterious or courageous. It just happened.

ROZENA MAART: In Part II, you offer a conceptualisation of racism. I'm particularly interested in how 'Necro-Being: An Actuarial Account of Racism' (2018) came about. Necro-being, you indicate, denotes 'that which makes living a kind of death --life that is simultaneously being robbed of its sheer potential physical being as well as non-being, the unborn'. Can you offer us some insight into the unfolding of your conceptualisation in this regard?

LEONARD HARRIS: I met Amílcar Cabral at Wabe Shebelle Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the bar; I was introduced to Emperor Haile Selassie at a dinner after a meeting of the African Union meeting as a visiting American student; I saw Samora Machel, Mozambican revolutionary at that time, give a speech at a meeting in the summer of 1972 in Portuguese, and I did not understand a word he said; I taught a course on logic at Attica Prison, New

York, where I met men and women who had committed murder and those facing one year in jail who were there for sentences of petty theft and neither could be parents while in prison; I visited the holocaust sites in Rwanda at the Gikongoro Memorial site (rooms of decayed bodies from the killing fields), Ntarama Church (5,000 seeking refuge, killed) in 1999; I did research on the holocaust in Namibia by the Germans but could not find much help; Cabral and Selassie were assassinated; Machel died in a plane crash. The names of unborn children, killed while in the womb of women hacked to death in Rwanda, were never counted because they were unborn.

So, I do not know. I could point to books like *Medical Apartheid*, *Way of Death*, or Mbembe's *Necro-Politics*. But I think it was probably the personal impact that made such books stand out in the first place. Without health and life, nothing follows.

The last few months (May to October 2020) have been difficult and painful for all of us. At its worst, we have seen the world and at its best, in terms of the masses world-wide resisting racism and police violence. I was reminded of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, published 161 years ago, which focuses on the years leading up to the French Revolution. Dickens writes:

> It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

As scholars world-wide, we have been confronted with pain and anguish, and in so many ways each day brought another unexpected mass protest even in the remotest part of the world.

ROZENA MAART: *The Leonard Harris Reader: A Philosophy of Struggle* was published before George Floyd was murdered. Can you offer some thoughts on how we can think through the events of the past few months?

LEONARD HARRIS: The #BlackLivesMatter movement highlights the reality of necro-being. Anti-black racism, whether in the United States, South Africa, India, France, or Brazil has made it possible for people in radically different conditions to find a way to give voice in their own worlds. No central

protest authority – so demonic dictators and authorities do not have a single organisation or leader to try and destroy - is a benefit. The incoherency and lack of a centralised authority directing protest in these times of radically different challenges to our very existence – best of times and worst of times – has movements and forms of community, making new traditions, that should give us hope.

ROZENA MAART: As you know, since #RhodesMustFall the discussion on decolonisation has intensified. How might students use *The Leonard Harris Reader* to think through crucial questions on decolonisation?

LEONARD HARRIS: Look for concepts that do not tie you, concepts in the old world; give yourself room to be born of your platform. To be 'decolonised' for me is not to spend time talking to folks who never talk to you or trap you inside concepts that make you a slave to a dead world. In Tuskegee, Alabama in 1980, I had letters from publishers that had rejected the articles I submitted to standard philosophy journals. I threw them all away and said to myself that I would never again try to be in a world that was never intended for me anyway. That's why new books and organisations, *Philosophy Born of Struggle (*1983); Philosophy Born of Struggle Association; Alain Locke Society, etc., and going to every African philosophy meeting I could find. Leave the Asylum. The void means you have to be creative.