

## **MEMPHIS MINNIE, GENOCIDE, AND IDENTITY POLITICS: A CONVERSATION WITH ALEX STEIN**

LDC: My mother taught me irony. She didn't graduate from high school. She was an excellent student, but there were no opportunities for her, living under Jim Crow. She didn't want me to become bitter?as she was?so she didn't want me to harbor these dreams, these grand illusions that I was going to grow up and be this big-time professor in some major university. She used to tell me, as she'd be making me clean the toilet twelve or fourteen times until it was spotless, that no one is ever going to pay me to read books. Pretty ironic, since it is practically all that I do now.

Poets can dwell in irony. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera talks about the laugh of the angel and the laugh of the devil. He is trying to define a Czech word that has no translation, *litost*. So, he tells a story about how he was in love with this girl and she was the best swimmer on the swim team and they always swam together and she would always beat him and this one time he really wanted to beat her?to win?and instead she beat him again. He was so frustrated and in love with her, requited and unrequited, all these contradictory sensations and impulses, that the only thing he could feel to do was slap her across the face. That feeling, the moment before he reached out and slapped her, was *litost*. In a stroke he had destroyed everything. Their friendship. Their affinity. Everything. Because she had beat him. He said he had struck her because she had laughed at him. Because that laugh had been the laughter of the devil.

It is always the laughter of the devil when the joke is on you. On the other hand, there is the laughter of the angels. One finds this everywhere in Shakespeare. The fool turns out to be the only wise person. This is the laughter that can save you. There are two sides of irony. That was the kind of thing my mother used to tell me all the time. She also told me: "Don't sit with your legs crossed. Don't sit in the sun. Don't wear your hair like that. You look like an Indian." "But, mom," I answered back, "we are Indians." "Yes," she'd say. "I know. But this is the twentieth century." That was everything I really needed to know about the world into which I was born, right there.

My grandmother grew up in her community at a time when you did not talk about your mother. I remember having this assignment in school to trace my family tree, and I had to interview my grandmother. Oh, man! "What's your name?" "Puddin' Tame! Ask me again and I'll tell you the same!" She refused to participate. She would not tell me anything. Certainly not about being an Indian, because they would slaughter you for that. That's what I wanted you to understand, when I wrote you that e-mail about how to prepare for our meeting: Best to ground one's self in actual conditions & relations?the poet's field?rather than wander in essences and illusions of time . . . forever imprisoned in the mindjail of taxonomies & hierarchies. Or, as Kunitz called it, "the tyranny of the single idea."

AS: Who was the first poet you fell in love with?

LDC: At the age when most young girls were putting up posters of the Beatles and Paul McCartney, my wall was covered with passages from Lord Byron. My brother had dropped out

of high school and he had a job in the library of this other high school and he used to "borrow" books. Alphabetically. He got up to the C's before they fired him. I had Auden on my shelf. Byron, Gwendolyn Brooks, the Brownings. The Complete Works of George Gordon (Lord) Byron.

Byron was a hippie wanting to be an Indian. An upper-class guy totally enamored of the exoticism of the new world, of new thought, and of the idea of freedom. Listen. [Reads] Sermons he read and lectures he endured and homilies and lives of all the saints. . . . At twelve he was fine. A fine but quiet boy. Although in infancy a little wild. They tamed him down amongst them to destroy his natural spirit. Not in vain they toiled. At least it seemed so. . . . And his mother's joy was to declare how sage and still and steady her young philosopher was grown already. This is from Don Juan. When I read that, I was like, what? Juan?! I could read this stuff for hours and hours. Did I identify with him? Yes. I was Lord Byron. And that was not a weird thing as a woman of color. An Indian. The poetic consciousness is an indigenous consciousness.

AS: Tell me about The Life and Times of Memphis Minnie.

LDC: That's the title of my completed screenplay: Pigmeat: The Life and Times of Memphis Minnie. She was also the topic of my uncompleted dissertation in History of Consciousness. Memphis Minnie. You've probably never heard the name?

AS: No, I haven't. Half the names you bring up, I have never heard of. I am mule ignorant.

LDC: Well, but you have an excuse. You're Canadian.

AS: Some days I just repeat to myself, like a mantra, "Melville! Whitman! Emerson! Give me strength. Give me the strength to bear my own stupidity. Give me the transcendental realization to accept the fact that I will probably never get any smarter than I am right now. That this is as far as I go in terms of my understanding.

LDC: [Laughs] Yes. All you really need are the Transcendentalists. That can cover a lot of ground. Talk about guys who wanted to be Indians! Emerson was my grandmother's favorite writer. I taught my grandmother how to read and write, because she always wanted to be able to read and write. She was a slave when she was a young girl. She was sold when she was eleven years old and remained enslaved until she got married at twenty-four. They were supposed to teach her English and teach her how to read and write. That was the deal. Oh, yeah. They taught her English, you know. "Chop the wood," and "Heat the water." "Mop the floor." "Do the laundry." But they didn't teach her how to read and write and this was a big thing for her right up until the time she died. From the first day I started kindergarten, every single lesson I got I taught to my grandmother that same evening, right up through high school. In high school I was into the Romantics, but my grandmother's favorites were the Transcendentalists. Her favorite essay was Emerson's Nature. We'd have our little grandma seminars. We'd sit around, we'd read it and we'd talk about it. She liked him because he was the most Indian.

AS: So, Memphis Minnie. . . .

LDC: Blues musician. Social reformer. I fell in love with her when I was fifteen, listening to KPFA radio, in Berkeley. They would play an Indian raga and then play something from Mozart, Schubert, and then Lightning Hopkins. Music! My brother worked for a radio station.

He was three years older and it was just the two of us. That was pretty much my family. My mother, my grandmother, my brother and I. My brother was a musician. He was the kind of person who from the time he was born, he could pick up this pumpkin and turn it into an instrument. He could make music out of a blade of grass. He could play that conch shell right there and it would sound like a saxophone. He would walk into these houses that my mother would clean and if they had an organ?or a piano!?in five minutes he would have the feel for it. He played by ear, songs on the radio. We couldn't afford music lessons, of course. Much less a piano. We had ocarinas. They were cheap.

AS: Ocarinas? What are they?

LDC: Like folk instruments. Toys. You could get them in plastic. They look kind of like potatoes. Four-holed whistles. Jug bands sometimes use them. Anyway, he was a musician and he was always playing music. He'd play underneath the freeway ramps, because the tones would resonate there. Or he'd stand over the open grate where the drainage was because it sounded like the Taj Mahal. Paul Horn at the Taj Mahal was popular at the time. He'd stand there for hours and compose and I'd sit alongside with my notebook and write. I was a poet. Poetry means: married to spirit. I was. At age eighteen, waiting outside a bus depot in a little doggy diner, I even wrote, in an earnest act of ceremony, a journal entry that was a formal vow of wedded union between myself and The Muse. Anyway, my brother was a musician and still is and he worked for a radio station and the play lists were a little more eclectic in those days. That's how I first heard of Memphis Minnie.

AS: How does your research on the history of Jim Crow fit into this?

LDC: You really should know this already. It is basic Ethnic Studies 101. The history of Jim Crow. What was happening, "separate but equal" had become actual law, whereby, legally, African-Americans couldn't drink at certain fountains, couldn't try on clothes in certain shops (because a white person wouldn't want to have to try on the same clothes afterward), couldn't get haircuts at certain shops, couldn't be educated. There were no actual high schools for African-Americans until 1920. Of course, there was a whole system of self-education within the African-American community dating from the 1880s, black colleges and what not, but most of them didn't include the liberal arts. Instead they taught agriculture or machines. Or, for women, maid skills and cooking.

So, the research that I am doing right now, on Jim Crow . . . and, let me be clear . . . this is not research in the sanctioned sense. I didn't go to class for any of this. I became obsessed, like with poetry. Poetry is an obsession. Poetry is not a discipline. Nobody is getting spanked, I don't think. You fall in love. You've read Goethe? Do you know his Elective Affinities? That's what it is . . . these correspondences. Where it started, I was seventeen years old and I was in the library. I was applying everything I had learned in high school about how to conduct research. Notecards and jotting down dates and pages and then later, at home, you spread them all out in front of you like Tarot cards and go to work divining them, and I became obsessed with Memphis Minnie.

I read, for example, on microfilm, every single issue of The Chicago Defender. That is an African-American newspaper founded in the 1800s. I was reading every single issue from her time period and somewhere along the line I found these conversations. Interviews with young, black college students. She was talking about her music. About the politics of her music. She was the quintessential soapbox speaker. She would literally take a soapbox and establish it in the middle of a busy crossway in the south side of Chicago and she'd play a few licks on her

guitar. Crowds would gather and then she would start talking about rent strikes. About slum owners. About violence. One of the things going on in the south side of Chicago at that time is they were burning down these road houses, these tenement houses. It was like another form of lynching and The Chicago Defender was documenting this. That was the news. Those were the conditions. She'd talk about that. Later, in the '40s, she'd talk about the African-American soldiers coming back from World War II and who were then under the system of Jim Crow that lasted until 1960.

How different were things for me? There was a time when I was five years old and my brother and I had been left off at the public swimming pool in downtown San Jose and I got too dark in the sun. My mother, right? "Don't sit in the sun." The pool officials stood me up in front of a wall. There was this shooting gallery silhouette and it was painted brown, on this wall, and I was darker than that figure. They said that I had to get out of the pool because I was colored. It didn't matter if I was Mexican. It didn't matter if I was Indian. It didn't matter what except that I was colored and that was the law. My brother was outraged. He was three years older than me and understood what was going on. I had no idea. I was being good, I thought. So they made us sit outside. Hot day. San Jose, California. It was in the 90s. No shade. Outside the cyclone fence, sitting there waiting for my mom who wasn't going to come back for hours. Couldn't drink water. Where? At what fountain? We had money but we couldn't go and buy a soda or something to eat. My mother came a little early. "What are you doing out here?" she wanted to know. "Oh, we got tired of swimming." We didn't tell her. She would have torn the place up. What could you do? You couldn't call a policeman. You couldn't complain. What could you do? Write to your congressman? So you see there was a connection there. That's where the poet dwells: in conditions and relations.

AS: So, Memphis Minnie?

LDC: There is a line in one of her songs: Nineteen and seventeen. Twenty-one was tough. Those days, in the dialect, they didn't say 1917. They said 19 and 17. The insight of any research is determined by the level at which the object of that research is being read. Memphis Minnie's lyrics have been interpreted and documented by so-called blues experts. One of the most prestigious of these experts came from France. Talk about coming from Canada, right? He came from France. He insists that line in her song reads: Nineteen and seventeen. When the winter was tough. It turns out that in 1917, yes, in fact there was a record blizzard in Memphis, Tennessee. But in the context of this song, what I heard at age fifteen, and what I still hear, is: Nineteen and seventeen. Twenty-one was tough. And one of the things she said in an interview is that she has always lied about her age. That she was really born in 1896. So, in 1917 she was twenty-one years old. What were the conditions in 1917? For many years there had been these so-called "race riots." Only they weren't race riots. One of the things she talks about is that in 1917, in East Saint Louis, there was a prosperous black middle class?doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs. She talks about how there were these Nazis and they came into East Saint Louis and tore apart every black person they could find. Man, woman, and child. The women went out, too, with their children, armed with spoons. And it wasn't done in anger, and it wasn't a fight, and it wasn't revenge. It was done with calm, as if they were at a holiday fair. Smiling, laughing, not in a hurry. Systematically, every single black person in East Saint Louis was massacred. This is what she said in the interviews.

She had been playing music since she was eleven years old. Traveling around, dressed up as a boy. She called herself Kid Douglas. She describes this scene where the love of her life, who was much, much younger than herself?she was like twenty-one, he was a teenager?a

banjo player?he was torn apart before her eyes. They left him just a bloodstain on the pavement. Like a rabbit or a cat that had been run over about twenty times. How she survived, there was this car?these people were middle class, they had cars?she climbed underneath and hugged onto the chassis. She could see from that place of concealment what was happening. Bands of men systematically burning out all the black people who were hiding and everything. This is a scene in my screenplay, because this is what she described. She said that children were taking spoons and gouging out the eyes. And then some music critic wonders why there are so many Blind Blakes and Blind Bobs and Blind Williams in Blues history.

Memphis Minnie was really the creator of the whole Chicago Blues style and was, besides, the unacknowledged inventor of the electric guitar. That's one of my little discoveries. She grew up in Walls, Mississippi, right near Memphis. She would go to Memphis and play music. She'd walk there. It was only fourteen miles. You could do it?if you wanted to. She'd ride a pig. She'd ride in on a hog's back. Most of my research I've ended up finding online. Especially by not plugging in something like: Race Relations in Walls, Mississippi. Instead, I'd plug in: Walls, Mississippi, Nigger. Boom! Bingo! Suddenly there is all this unsifted documentation from estates and stuff like that. Follow your obsession. If you can't do it by one means, you do it by another. That's the way of the poor, right? If you can't get a grant to haunt the Library of Congress.

AS: Did you have a model for this kind of research?

LDC: I had Hayden White. I still consider him my academic mentor. I went to him and said, "I'm sitting in these seminars with these guys who have 20,000 dollar educations." And this is at a time when 20,000 dollars was more than the whole financial history of my entire family tree, much less what anyone made in a year, much less what anyone paid for a year of education for any one child. The first day I attended Hayden White's Theories and Methods seminar, the other students were sitting around saying, "Hey, where did you go to school? Oh, yeah? How much did that cost? Only 18,000 dollars? That's pretty good." These are all white guys and there they are in these political science seminars because they've known since they were five years old the names of all the generals and all the battles and they'd read all the history books, knew all the "master class" aesthetics. I didn't think I could compete with that. I was a street kid. What I wanted to do, I didn't have the background for. I wanted classical training as a philosopher. I was interested in the logos of power and I was interested in the language of power. I was not interested in analyzing literature, you know? Phew!

AS: Let the record show that at this juncture in the interview you plugged your nose between thumb and forefinger in the universal signification for "something stinks."

LDC: So I told Hayden White, "I'm going to need this, I'm going to need that. What would you advise?" He stopped in his tracks. We were on a path there under the redwoods in Santa Cruz, and he said, "Well, you know what the problem with background is? As soon as you start going into the background, it never ends. How far are you going to go? Are you going to stop here? Here? Here? Before you know it you'll have spent twenty years of your life in the Middle Ages." That was a personal thing from him. He was a medievalist. "Forget about background," he said. "What do you need? Pursue your obsession." So, I decided I was going to analyze an anti-aesthetic. And what could be more anti-aesthetic than poor Southern Black Women's Blues? It was sold off the back of train cars. It wasn't considered real music. For real music you went to the symphony. You went to fine parties. You didn't listen to these teeny little records. That was for black people.

I'm going to put on a recording for you. This is Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe: 1929 to 1934. Listen to the words of the songs. She's talking about hitchhiking. I flagged a train. Didn't have a dime. Tried to run away from that home of mine. Oh, boy. In my girlish days. I hit the highway, caught me a truck. Nineteen and seventeen. Twenty-one was tough. Didn't know no better, oh boy, in my girlish days. When the winter was tough? When the winter was rough? That's one level of reading, of course. Makes some sense if you've just come from France. But just for starters the syllable count is all off. There are too many syllables. Rhetoric of the signified. Context! How you hear a thing. As a fifteen-year-old, I heard it: Nineteen and seventeen. Twenty-one was tough. See? Listen! You can toot your whistle, you can ring your bell, but I know you've been wanting it, by the way you smell. I'm on my way . . . to Frisco town. There's a boa constricted in a lemon stick, I don't mind being with you but my mama is sick. I'm on my way . . . to Frisco town. Are you hearing that?

AS: What was that line you just talked over? You've got to give me that.

LDC: [Lightly, but tunefully] I woke up this morning, about half past five. My baby turned over, cried just like a child. I'm on my way . . . to Frisco town. The French guy says that this is a throwaway lyric. That it has no meaning. Memphis Minnie wrote 460 songs. There is not one throwaway lyric in any of them. What does it mean? My baby turned over, cried just like a child." In these days, women did not call their men babies. That was not part of the dialect. But, think: If you are pregnant, early in the morning, half past five, that's when the baby is moving. That's when the baby is kicking. What is this song about? The thing is, these texts have different levels. Rhetoric of the signified, right? Context! How you hear a thing. Now, why is she going to San Francisco? The very first verse is: That old Frisco train makes a mile a minute. And that old coach, I'm going to sit down in it. I'm on my way . . . to Frisco town. If you knew your history of Jim Crow, you'd know that in 1929 a black person was not even allowed to sit in the train. Du Bois talks about being thrown off the train the first time he visited the South, even though he had a ticket. He held on so tight they had to unscrew his chair and throw him out right along with it?and, he kept that chair.

But, anyway, the song is called Frisco Town. In this research that I've been doing, I've learned that the only instance of legalized abortion at this time was in San Francisco. In San Francisco Memorial Hospital they performed abortions. If you were pregnant and needed an abortion, you could get a legal abortion, but they would also sterilize you. There were these train lines. One ran from Chicago to San Francisco. Free coach class. In the conversations, the interviews, that I researched, Memphis Minnie says she was raped. Rape was rampant at this time. Statistics were not really kept. Some of it has been documented. Most of it has not. But what we know is that the rapes were occurring at a phenomenal rate. A young girl, eleven,

thirteen, seventeen, traveling, hitchhiking. This was why she dressed herself up as a man. That's what that other song was about. Nineteen and seventeen. Twenty-one was tough. They'd grab you by the hair. Pull you in. These truckers. It didn't matter what sex you were, even. These were the conditions. And all of that rape? That's a lot of abortions. The powers that be, they didn't want a bunch of mulatto kids running around. Germany was one of the countries that founded the Eugenics Society around 1912. In 1929, when this song was recorded, that rhetoric was starting up again. The sterilization of the mongrel races. The retarded. The deficient. The derelict. That was a term. The derelict.

These were legal definitions. Black, Indian women were sent to San Francisco. Or transient, derelict women. Or if they could prove that you were insane. You were given an abortion. You were told to sign your X. Memphis Minnie was given a piece of paper and told to sign her X to it, but she could read and she could write. She was literate. She saw that it authorized her sterilization and she refused to sign. They gave her a shot. Knocked her out with something. Forced her to make her X on the paper and they sterilized her. That's what this song was about. That old Frisco train makes a mile a minute. Why would she be going to San Francisco? This was a poor woman who played to poor people. What does it mean, I don't mind being with you, but my mama's sick? My mama is sick. That's a phrase that means, "I'm pregnant," or "I'm having my period." Levels of reading, see? There is a safety layer built into these lyrics. For self-protection. But, these are crucial documents left by eyewitnesses. That's why I wanted you to read the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, *We Wear the Mask*. Masks, do you see? Levels of revelation. What we bring to the text, that is how we hear it. Sure, it's just a nice song about some sexy darkies screwing on a train. Come on. At this time, blacks were not even allowed on the trains. Some basic knowledge is necessary here.

AS: Lots of Ph.D. candidates are now writing about your work in their dissertations. Have you seen any of these or heard students or other scholars give public presentations about your work?

LDC: I should pay more attention to such things. When I came up for tenure recently, I didn't have the documentation of just how many people were writing papers and articles in which my work figured. I went to the university library one day and I told one of the librarians that I knew there were at least a few papers written on me and could he help me find them. He took me through all the different databases. Set it all up. Turned on the printer. Pages kept scrolling through for about an hour. More than one hundred. All top to bottom with citations. Dissertations, theses, publications, presentations. I would like to say that the people who have produced the scholarship that I have had the pleasure of reading, I don't see them as my critics. In many cases, they have become my close, close friends. People I share with on many subjects. I am a scholar, myself. I've said that I have a love-hate relationship with the institute of higher learning, but I'm not opposed to scholarship. A poet is a scholar. I really believe that you should know not just your own age, but other ages.

There is certainly a place for theory. I do believe, though, that one should not analyze one's own milieu. People should write critical work and do critical scholarship, but ideally in another language that is pretty near extinct. This is what I try to teach: that there must be a place for creative generation that is distinct from selection, distinct from revision, distinct from judgment. Camus said the whole purpose of art is to escape judgment. One should never analyze the generation of one's own work. Yet that is the chief project of these institutions of higher education. We live in an economy of goods and services. Forget capitalism. Goods and services. Of which poetry supplies neither. That is why you can't look in the phone book and find it between plumbing and poultry. Call up somewhere and say, "I need a good poem." The

institutions of higher education have gone into this corporate mode. Which has precipitated this crisis of legitimization. How many dissertations have got to be written about me before I can be considered legitimate? Is there a mathematical formula? Before people in authority respect me as an intellectual and think of me in that context? Before they validate me and listen to me and concur with me and change their minds on my account?

In my field, in the humanities, in this goods and services economy, we are working in this legitimization factory. And some of us are being put in the awkward position of trying to legitimize ourselves. These questions! These undermining questions. How are people going to see me? Where am I going to fit in? When I was selected for The Norton Anthology of Poetry, their staff was calling me over and over saying, "We need a bio, we need a bio, we're not going to be able to include you if you don't send us a bio." They wrote these letters. But I didn't respond. And I was thinking, am I insane? Here is my opportunity. People would kill for this chance. But I still didn't do it. They ended up constructing one themselves.

What happens in some English departments is that instead of sticking to actual conditions and relations? or, in other words: history? it becomes about how smart you are. Who has the superior intellect? Who has the superior vision? Who is playing tennis with all the right people? I'm not talking ego. I'm saying look at the conditions of power. Look at the conditions and look at the relations. Soon everyone is fighting and in competition for the little crumbs of grants and little travel disbursements and they are spending all their time writing proposals. It becomes this thing where you have to assert yourself in the half-light, again, of what Kunitz called "the tyranny of the single idea." Identity politics. Multiculturalism. Political correctness. Who has the right interpretation? Is it modernity, or is it postmodernity? And postmodernism is not even a thing! It is not a movement, it is not an artistic style, it is not an anything. It is not a noun. It is not a verb. It is a condition. A consciousness. And it is a gestalt consciousness. A gestalt is like one of those black and white drawings you find in a book of optical illusions. Sometimes you see a face and sometimes you see a vase. That's why I keep saying you have to dwell among actual conditions and relations.

Postmodernism is a gestalt consciousness. It comes from subjugated knowledges. This is what the United States was turning away from in the '60s. One of Foucault's big ideas is "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges." Back to the esoteric philosophies from the Far East. Back to Zen Buddhism. You can't say hippie is one thing. You can't say Chicana is one thing. You can't say Latina is one thing. Like, "How Chicana are you?" Right? Can you really answer that question? These are taxonomies. Hierarchies. And we are forced into this. "We're not going to be able to include you if you don't send us your bio." This is the mode of scholarship in the institutions of higher education now.

Want to hear about my first encounter with a critic? A Ph.D. student. A Latina. She comes at me through this theoretical framework. She wants to look at Chicana writers and she's worked up this triad. That is what was fashionable at the time: triads. This triad between Feminist, Mexican, and Poet. So you are divided up and your divided consciousness has to do with your conflict as a Feminist versus a Mexican. Or your conflict as a Poet versus a Feminist. This was my first impression of academia: that it just made people crazy. The first thing she did when she got off the plane, she burst into tears and she cried for hours. The stress of the research. Finally getting to Provincetown where I was staying. She just kept crying. "Can I get you something? Medicinal tea? Do you need to make a phone call?" "No, no, I'll be fine. I'll be fine." I'm thinking, I don't want to be a professor, if this is what it does to you. When we finally sat down to work she asked me, "If you could narrow it down, what is the meaning of your poetry?" I told her, "Death." There is no way you could have analyzed my first book without

talking about death and choice. You can choose not to be wiped out. You might have to dance around a little, but you can do it. "Freedom is expensive, but the price is not impossible to pay," as Don Juan says. Not Byron's Don Juan. Carlos Castaneda's. I didn't want to talk to her about Chicanas. I wanted to talk to her about death. Death and choice. That's where the tension in those poems comes from. I went on and on, in my typical way. She took notes and recorded hours of tape and when the book came out there was nothing about it. The word death never appeared in relation to my writing. The word triad, yes. And feminist. Not that I am not a feminist, but . . . again, taxonomies and hierarchies. Because that is the project: legitimization. Fit into the schema. It's kind of like taking a poem that is a book-length epic, and forcing it into a villanelle. It just doesn't work.

AS: What do you say about suffering?

LDC: My favorite philosopher, Rikki Lee Jones, said, "You don't have to suffer to create art. You will suffer." Regardless! And the thing about suffering is it does not compute within the framework of taxonomies and hierarchies. How can I say that my pain is any more valid, any more significant, concentrated, painful, than your pain? How can one pain be legitimized over another? It just hurts. If somebody has got their boot on your throat it doesn't matter if you are black or if you are brown, or if you are an Indian, or if you just stole a hundred bucks. What matters is the boot on your throat and how are you going to get it off? We are talking about oppression versus repression. Just like in my second book *From the Cables of Genocide*. Somebody wrote about it that in the Oxford English Dictionary there are about twenty different definitions of the word "cables." Yes, and I intended every one of them. For "genocide," there is only one definition. Just as oppression has a lot of different levels, whereas repression (and I don't mean psychological repression) has only one. It is force. Terror. Pain. Death. Oppression is a consequence. It comes after. But repression does not deconstruct. I have said it and I'll go on saying it, "Genocide does not deconstruct." Genocide has no other side.

AS: Is that why you say you have found it so difficult to teach courses in Ethnic Literature?

LDC: Philosophy is the pursuit of truth and beauty. The distillation, the analysis, the discovery, the uncovering of what is truth and beauty, right? And scholarship and education have always been all about truth and beauty. So, this is a case where the substance of the subject matter is not truth and beauty. Is not justice. Is not, in Kant's formulation: "Education lifts man's sorrows to a higher level." Instead, the subject matter is ugliness and lies. Deception. Injustice. Who wants to hear about all the people ground up in the Holocaust? Who wants to look at that? Who wants to think about that suffering? Much less, is it in your own family? You don't gather around the dinner table and talk about your second cousin who had his fingers crushed by a boot. Or in another family talk about your third cousin who was the perpetrator wearing that boot. It is not the ignorance of the students that makes it difficult to teach them this material. It is their lack of background. The classes become these encounter sessions, these group therapy sessions, because the subject is not truth and beauty, it is death. And this is the fundamental paradigmatic shift going on in these institutions of higher education right now.

Let's look at this buried history. Why is it buried? Why? Because it has to do with rape. With subjugation. With taking babies by their legs and smashing their heads against boulders in front of their mothers. It's not an "agenda." It's not "my thing." It's what it means to walk into a busload of people and have them dismiss you and have them see you as inhuman. Have them despise you for what you represent physically. No, this is not my "agenda." This is not my field of studies, Ethnic Studies. But, yes, damn right I'm an expert on it. Yes, I have read

everything. But mainly I have lived these things. These things are not a surprise to me. But when the student first encounters these things, it's just like any death. It's just like any grieving process. The student has to go through all the stages?denial, anger, bargaining, depression?to acceptance. We all need to go through that process, of course, but we?that is, cultures that have experienced that repression, that death?have been going through this process already, for generations.

Although, once you have been through the process, that doesn't mean it's over. The guilt comes back. The bargaining comes back. The self-sabotage comes back. "Oh, I can't be successful because it is not an honor to the dead. It's a dishonor to the memory. The memory which should have destroyed me long ago." Lucille Clifton writes, "Something has tried to kill me and has failed." I don't need to be an enemy to myself, do I? When I've got a real enemy out there. In poetry, in teaching poetry, rather than in teaching Ethnic Studies, there is a layering that gives you access to the symbolic realm and the symbolic realm is where significance is. Is where you encounter and resolve these basic contradictions. My mother is dead. I can ruin my life about it, or I can go, okay, okay, it just happened. Now, move on. That's straight from my book. It's the poem to my grandmother. It was going to be the title poem. Pleiades: from the Cables of Genocide. (Reads) She knows the words / To the song now."

This is about these buried, subjugated knowledges. What happened to this knowledge? What happened to this civilization? What happened to these cultures? They go underground. I'm saying here how she didn't know anything. You didn't talk about it. Not only that, but you were forbidden to talk about it. She could remember a song. She couldn't remember any of the words. She could remember every night her grandmother going out and she would sing this song to the Seven Sisters, which was the constellation Pleiades. I found out later, through other people's scholarship, that this lost song, this forgotten song, was a creation story. That we came down from the Pleiades. So there was this song in her native language that my grandmother's grandmother would sing, that my grandmother could not remember because she was sold into slavery at eleven years old, and she would look up at the stars and try, always, to remember.

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