

# Decolonizing the grounds of ethical inquiry: a dialogue between Kant, Foucault and Glissant

Robbie Shilliam  
Victoria University of Wellington

*Millennium* 39 (3), 2011 pp.649-665

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In so far as it is predicated upon a contested negotiation of different forms of inter-subjectivity, the problem of dialogue is a problem of ethics. In this respect, the fundamental challenge lies not so much in refining generally agreed upon moral commandments, but rather, as feminist and postcolonial critiques have long maintained, in assessing who are allowed to be legitimate interlocutors in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Legitimacy here is effectively measured by the possession of an adequate ethical faculty. In the social sciences this adequacy has almost always been attributed to those who can be conceived to authentically live in modernity. And this authenticity, in turn, has implicitly been attributed first and foremost to sons or daughters of Europe.

The question of who can dialogue is somewhat disingenuously asked in the Western Academy, an institution which has claimed for itself the highest position in the production of ethical and technical knowledge on the human condition. This increasingly tenuous claim rests on an assertion that, more than any other corporate body, the Western Academy is most entrenched within the condition of modernity because it is most intimately entwined to the processes of becoming modern that are grounded in the European – and then by extension Western - experience.<sup>3</sup> The argument is tautological because so is the social scientific ideal of the modern condition, that is, an historically unprecedented self-reflexivity of being and becoming that necessitates the rise of a corporate body of critical/skeptical/disenchanted “public” intellectuals differentiated

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was written while I was a visiting fellow at the Centre for Caribbean Thought, University of West Indies. I thank the Centre for their hospitality and inspirations. I also thank the journal editors for their support and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *boundary 2* 12/13 (April 1, 1984): 333-358; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>3</sup> An argument that famously underpins the work of Jürgen Habermas, see for example, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. M.P. d’Entrevies and S. Benhabib (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1997), 38-55; and in IR see for example, Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

from the laity and “traditional” seers and sages.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, the adjectives that mark the distinctiveness of the modern intellectual/condition - critical/skeptical/disenchanted - also function more broadly as the mark of ethical adeptness amongst the interlocutors of this condition.<sup>5</sup>

In fine, I am suggesting that the Western academy is institutionally narcissistic when it comes to considering who might be worthy interlocutors in an ethical inquiry. Challenges to this institutional narcissism have constantly been mounted, both from alternative institutions of knowledge production and, to a lesser extent, by individuals and groups within the Western academy. The latter are better known to the academy, especially through their critiques of enlightenment thought (especially contract theory) and modernization theory. These critiques have revealed the way in which self-avowedly universalist theories of progress and development disguise an originating, colonially induced and racially interpellated qualification to these processes and “public goods”.<sup>6</sup>

The narcissism of the Western academy depends upon a twofold delineation of the modern condition (and its associated ethos) to the ground of what might be termed the “European-modern”. First, temporally speaking, pre-/yet-to-be-modern subjects are assumed to be unable to adequately dialogue with their modern interlocutors; however, the later can provide the more universal meaning of the former’s condition and thus prescribe techniques through which they might cultivate a sufficient ethical adeptness. Second, in terms of spatiality, because modernity is assumed to have gestated within European history, it is European ancestry - the more intimately “white” the better - that marks the authentic community of interlocutors.<sup>7</sup>

This temporal and spatial delineation of a putatively universal condition cannot be recognized face-on by the Western academy because the act of delineation owes much to a distinctly “non-modern” form of inter-subjectivity, that is to say, a racialized form that is personal, affective and particular instead of impersonal, rational and universal.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the academy justifies its institutional superiority by virtue of its legitimate occupation of impersonal, rational and universal subjectivity; however, the modus

---

<sup>4</sup> Classic texts include Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of logic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1936).

<sup>5</sup> See especially the many works of Ashis Nandy, for example, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Gurinder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (London: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); . For an example of how African American sociologists have been erased from the founding canon of American Sociology see Gurinder K. Bhambra, “The African American Dilemma: Emancipation and the Struggle for Equality” (Unpublished paper, University of Warwick, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Lewis R. Gordon, “Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization: Toward the Postcolonial in Africana Political Thought,” in *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*, ed. Nalini Persram (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 121-142.

operandi of the occupation has always been personal, affective and particular. And the mode has been made invisible by a canonical repetition of the transparent fact of occupation. This has led to an unthinking exceptionalism whereby Europe is made sacred ground: only the European family and its unsullied descendents are allowed to possess a relevant tradition *and* to live modernity. But the less intimately one stands within this sacred ground the more one can only cultivate one's ethical faculty vicariously by imbibing a classical European/Western education so as to become a derivative - but not authentic - modern.<sup>9</sup>

Putting these arguments and assertions all together we might claim the following. Who can legitimately dialogue – that is to say, who can be considered to have a sufficiently developed ethical faculty - is revealed by the degree to which they can contribute to what is in fact a *monologue* of the becoming of the “modern” critical/skeptical/disenchanted intellectual on the grounds laid out already by the Western Academy and especially its social-scientific tradition of thought. This monologue is policed in both temporal and spatial terms as the ground of the European-modern. In this case, an ethical inquiry that takes the form of a dialogue is only possible through a decolonizing movement, that is to say, a relational pluralizing of the grounds upon which interlocutors take part in the inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

In this article I explore the above claims by addressing the works of two authors who are indispensable to the current canon of IR theory, Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, and one author who is not included in the canon, Édouard Glissant, the Martiniquean poet and literary critique. With regards to Kant and Foucault, I show how within both authors there exists at the same time a strong endorsement of the policing of ethical inquiry on the grounds of the European-modern *and* a weaker resistance to it. With regards to Glissant I focus on his set of essays entitled *Caribbean Discourse* to show how he strongly endorses a relational pluralizing of the grounds of ethical inquiry while *at the same time* retaining a weaker accommodation to the European-modern. In the course of these discussions I present each author's assessment of an adequate ethical faculty through the heuristic form of a figure: in Kant, the *enlightened philosopher*, in Foucault, the *creative work of art*, and in Glissant, the *maroon*. In the final section I rehearse a dialogue amongst these three figures that opens up the grounds of ethical inquiry to decolonizing impulses.

## **Kant's enlightened philosopher**

Kant's ethical inquiry is predicated upon the separation of the noumenal realm – the human faculty for abstract rational thought based upon universal understandings of time, space and aesthetics – and the phenomenal realm – manifested in interest-based politics and their associated particularistic histories. Kant's inquiry seeks to relate the

---

<sup>9</sup> On these issues in general, see Derek Walcott, “The muse of history,” in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. O. Coombs (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 1-27.

<sup>10</sup> See E. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. A. Martinez and C. Morkovsky (New York: Orbis Books, 1985); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

abstract rationality universally shared amongst individuals to their particular political circumstances through the guidance offered by a fictional narrative of universal history. For this endeavor, Kant mobilizes the concept of Reason as that which might span the two categorically opposite realms and bind social beings together in the pursuit of universal human progress.

Kant sources Reason from the noumenal realm but expects it to influence the actions of individuals in the phenomenal realm. In this way, Reason is given epistemic sanctity yet is also practically influential because its core imperative is actionable: “every action which by itself or by its maxim enables the freedom of each individual’s will to co-exist with the freedom of everyone else in accordance with a universal law is *right*.”<sup>11</sup> Kant is careful to say that this imperative is categorical, that is, it is not a description of the phenomenal world but an injunction to social beings that they ought to act so that their freedom harmonizes with the freedom of all others, a path laid out in a fictional narrative of universal history:<sup>12</sup> to act upon the categorical imperative necessitates an historical movement towards a civil state - a “republic” based upon constitutional equality of all before the law and a separation of the executive from the legislative.<sup>13</sup>

For Kant, the vocation of the philosopher is to safeguard the rights of the people, although not by means that would undermine the legal basis of the state. To do this, the philosopher must be guided by Reason rather than faith or tradition. Thus, for Kant, the philosophers should be the only corporate grouping in society whose obligations to the state require them to make use of Reason critically and dispassionately in a public setting; other groups, such as military and administrators, must follow their obligations in a private capacity, i.e. in terms of their allegiance to the ruler.<sup>14</sup> Kant’s distinction between public and private is important because it imbues the philosopher with a special and privileged ethical faculty for public dialogue. Moreover, it is crucial that we contextualize Kant’s distinction by reference to the legacy of Frederick the Great’s absolutist reign in Prussia.

In Kant’s opinion, Frederick had allowed for a relative autonomy of the philosopher to pursue his activities as a corporate group vis-à-vis other corporate groups, especially the laity. I mention this because many commentators, including Foucault, have misapprehended the meaning of Kant’s distinction between public and private, presuming this distinction to reflect or speak to an effectively “modern” context or at least a modern ethos, rather than to the liminal position of Prussia within a putatively modernizing Europe.<sup>15</sup> Kant is clear that his Prussia is *not* a civil state; however, he claims that the “enlightened despot”, Frederick the Great, had been ruling in such a way *as if* the form of

---

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, But it Does Not Apply in Practice’,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-77.

<sup>14</sup> Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory’,” 85; Kant, “‘What is Enlightenment?’,” 55-56; Immanuel Kant, “The Contest of the Faculties,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 186.

<sup>15</sup> See Robbie Shilliam, *German Thought and International Relations: The Rise and Fall of a Liberal Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), chap. 3.

government was republican. Hence his famous caution: “If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*.”<sup>16</sup> Kant’s fictional narrative of universal progress colors Frederick’s absolutism as a future-modern state of affairs.

I am suggesting that there is another way of reading Kant as a “philosopher of limits”. Rather than arguing that the modern condition brings forth self-reflexivity in the form of an immanent critique of the limits of this condition, Kant is focused upon exploring how the limits of Reason are determined by the fact that the ideal world stands ahead, over and distinct from the “backward” material world of politics and history. The ethical faculty of the philosopher must therefore incorporate the chasm between the two realms: universal Reason is real and individually possessed as a noumenal faculty but exists only vicariously in the phenomenal world due to the wise actions of a king. This is why the philosopher has a special role to play as “he who spans the breach”, articulating a story of universal becoming by which abstract Reason modifies – if not rules – the phenomenal world.

In fine, Kant affirms a constitutive un-modernity, *the very recognition of which is the sign of a sufficiently developed ethical faculty*. Most proponents of the Democratic Peace Thesis would twice fail this test in Kant’s opinion. First, they effectively grant the phenomena of liberal democratic societies a noumenal status, and judge non-liberal societies purely as phenomena. Second, these contemporary “philosophers” extricate themselves from the phenomenal world in order to monologue to the “others” on the ideal image that they believe *can* be – and providence willing *will* be – instantiated universally in the phenomenal world.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, in terms of another aspect, the democratic peace theorists *are* the worthy successors of Kant. From the early 1760s onwards Kant consistently wrote about the natural world and its relationship to anthropology, that is to say, the way in which, over the course of natural history, human qualities and attributes have been modified to suit particular places. These works were not separate to his “Copernican revolution”, that is to say, his situating of the innate universal senses and rational capacities of the human being at the centre of moral inquiry. Indeed, it is in his investigations of the diversity of human experience where Kant first clearly lays out what will become his categorical imperative in the form of a statement upon the inherent dignity of the human condition in “all” its diversity.<sup>18</sup> However, it is in these very works that certain categories of human beings fall out of the universal influence of sense and Reason.

An expedient place to start in this respect is with Kant’s division of the faculties of reception and feeling into two categories: the sublime and the beautiful. Both are

---

<sup>16</sup> Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 58.

<sup>17</sup> For an extant cognate argument see B. Jahn, “Kant, Mill and Illiberal Legacies in International Affairs,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 177-207.

<sup>18</sup> See the translator’s notes in Immanuel Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” in *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. G. Zöllner and R.B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20.

valuable to Kant, nevertheless, the sublime is more universalistic in terms of the principles it embodies, foremost of which is noble virtue.<sup>19</sup> Kant allows men and women to possess both, but in men the gravitation of the mix is towards the sublime and in women it is towards the beautiful.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, when Kant looks towards Europe he finds societies that possess both, but emphasize one or the other: the French and Italians gravitate towards the beautiful while Germans, English and Spanish tend towards the sublime.<sup>21</sup> Kant maps this internal division vicariously onto what he has heard of the non-European world, with the Arabs being comparative reflections of the Spanish, the Persians of the French, and the Japanese of the English.<sup>22</sup> However, he considers the receptions and feelings of the Indians and Chinese to be simply grotesque;<sup>23</sup> the savages of the Americas – barring kind reports of some tribes from Canada – lack feeling;<sup>24</sup> and Negroes “have by nature no feeling rising above the ridiculous” compounded with the “fact” that they keep their women in abject slavery.

These last qualifications are crucial because it introduces into Kant’s universal schema – dignity of human nature as the font of the categorical imperative – a spatial exclusion that uses the expectations (and not “facts”) of European enlightenment as the judgmental comparator. To recapitulate, dignity may extend to women in Kant’s schema because they are capable in principle of exercising both the sublime and the beautiful; so too amongst Europe’s variegated polities; vicariously so amongst Arabs, Persians and Japanese; the evidence so far would indicate little or no capability amongst the Indians and Chinese; perhaps a few American savages are redeemable; but Negroes are *by nature* incapable of feeling the sublime and beautiful, that is to say, dignity and the categorical imperative cannot extend to them.

Kant drives this point home in a famous note:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment of his wives replied: you whites are real fools, for first you concede so much to your wives, and then you complain when they drive you crazy. There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this scoundrel was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the content of the argument, the Negro’s utterances are non-sensical *prima facie* for Kant because he does not believe that reason extends to those beings whose skin color can be termed black. In short, the philosopher simply cannot dialogue with those variants of humanity who, primarily because of their skin colour, have no natural ethical faculty. As Robert Bernasconi (amongst others) has long argued,<sup>26</sup> Kant’s categorization of the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40-43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” in *Race*, ed. R. Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11-36.

variegated nature of humanity is a distinctly racial one that striates humanity after its original plurilisation into four main races which are conceived entirely through a basic skin color optic and, what is more, cannot change their qualities even when moving beyond and out of their originating geographical spaces.<sup>27</sup> For Kant, Negroes are not made stupid by the American whip but by their African birthright whereby, despite emerging out of a clime of tropical abundance, they are too lazy to reap the reward of this abundance.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps practical reason would prescribe vigorous European mastery as the best form of rule over them.

In sum, Kant does not bind an adequate faculty for ethical inquiry solely to a modern temporality – it must weave between modern and un-modern times; yet in racial-spatial terms, the less European-white one is, the more unwound the binding becomes until it is entirely unraveled before the first words are even spoken to an African.

### **Foucault's creative work of art**

In his genealogy of “the ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents”,<sup>29</sup> Foucault reads Kant in a way that, as I have argued above, paints over the irreducible un-modern at the heart of the sage's ethical inquiry. Foucault instead credits Kant as marking the limit-attitude of the modern philosopher, that is to say, Kant provides an immanent critique of modern reason that prevents it “from going beyond the limits of what is given in experience.”<sup>30</sup>

What precisely this modern experience consists of Foucault lays out by way of a comparison with the ancient Greeks. In the ancient world, argues Foucault, a shift occurred from ethics practiced as a *techne* of life to a *techne* of self, from how to live in the city to how to develop and transform the self. This ascetic of freedom was effectively a call to “take care of yourself”. However, Christianity transformed this ethic into a renunciation of the earthly self, i.e. a freedom *from* the flesh.<sup>31</sup> Yet subsequently, in modernity, it is no longer believed that ethics is founded in religion, nor is it desired that a legal system intervenes in moral private life.<sup>32</sup> Having laid out this genealogy, Foucault is concerned to redeem ethical inquiry in modernity as a practice of freedom by working on the self. And the attempt to re-ground ethics in the unstable and treacherous grounds of modernity is at least part of the purpose of Foucault's growing concern for “governmentality”.

---

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Of the Different Races of Human Beings,” in *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. G. Zöller and R.B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95; Immanuel Kant, “Determination of the Concept of a Human Race,” in *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. G. Zöller and R.B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 146, 152, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Kant, “Of the Different Races of Human Beings,” 93.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: New Press, 1997), 262.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 779.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 260-262, 270-271; Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self As a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: New Press, 1997), 282, 285.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 255.

Rather than positing power and domination against a transcendental morality, and rather than focusing on their legal institutionalization, Foucault approaches these capabilities as practices that “individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, the concept of governmentality “makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others which constitute the very stuff of ethics.”<sup>34</sup> To encourage this practice, Foucault re-presents modernity not as a phenomenal stage in universal history but as an attitude, effectively a particular ethos. In other words, modernity is articulated by Foucault as a mode of relating to a contemporary reality in its flux and contingency, and, especially, as a mode of self-understanding that does not reveal an essence of “man” but rather “compels him to face the task of producing himself.”<sup>35</sup> The freedom of the subject that Foucault hopes to resurrect as an ethics of modernity is thus not a project to “liberate man in his own being”, i.e. to uncover the authentic modern self or the kernel of noumenal reason that lurks beyond the messy phenomenal world. Rather, freedom is a practice of creating one’s self “as a work of art”.<sup>36</sup>

I want to note at this point that while Foucault is well known for undermining the enlightenment notion of sovereign Reason, his ethical inquiry accepts the temporality of modernity. To be clear, this acceptance might not require the endorsement of an Enlightenment grand narrative, but it nevertheless carves out a distinctive condition called modernity (the Greeks did not live in it) that is constituted by a temporal sensibility of endless flux and contingency, or rather, the impossibility of foundationalism. It is important to note this because the distinction encourages an implicit policing by Foucault of ethical inquiry on the grounds of the European-modern.

This effect comes to light in the course of an interview on ethics. Foucault acknowledges that to talk of self-transformation is to court the project of “liberation”. Yet he is cautious in doing so because such a project “risks falling back on the idea that there is a base human nature”, which to Foucault invokes authenticity (foundations) rather than creativity and is therefore inadequate for ethical inquiry by modern subjects.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, he does not entirely disown this project: “when a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizer, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense.” Rather, Foucault is concerned with what happens *after* liberation when new ethics will be needed to “define admissible and acceptable forms of existence of political society.”<sup>38</sup> Foucault therefore acknowledges the disarticulation of colonial experience from the contemporaneity of European modernity. But he then rushes over that experience into its prophesized future, a future he assumes to be – or at least does not

---

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self,” 300.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: New Press, 1997), 309-312.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 312; Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 262.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self,” 282.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



bring into doubt that it will not be - the grounds of European-modern experience.<sup>39</sup> With this leap, Foucault leaves behind the question of liberation from colonialism and embraces the question of liberation from/of sexuality.<sup>40</sup>

This tendency to quickly glance over contemporaneous non-European spaces is not a methodological anomaly in Foucault's works. For example, in the famous preface to the *Order of Things*, Foucault, contra Kant, does not see grotesquery in the taxonomies of a Chinese encyclopedia reported by Jorge Luis Borges, but merely a different order.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the difference of this order is of value to Foucault only as a contrast that serves to affirm the specificity (indispensability?) of modern European practices of categorization. Additionally, in his late 1960s Tunisian sojourn, Foucault used the "distance" (was it in fact ever removed?) he had attained from France primarily to sharpen his powerful critique of ethnology and the way in which it required the "historical sovereignty" of European thought.<sup>42</sup> Well after this experience, when in an interview he articulates the problem of power in terms of the question "who are we?", Foucault does so through a straightforward European-modern narrative moving from the ethnic domination of feudal times towards present day political-economic struggles against exploitation that is silent on the Maghreb as a space caught up in these movements.<sup>43</sup> In short, there is no mention of surely the most powerful "dividing practice", namely that of dividing humanity into "modern" Europeans and pre-modern non-Europeans.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, unlike Kant, Foucault disallows any aesthetic-cultural distinctive hierarchies amongst the human races, indeed, he famously expects and encourages the (white) male European figure of the Enlightenment "human" to be erased by the tides of the sea.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, we cannot ignore Robert Young's point that Foucault was politically radicalized by his sojourn in Tunisia, a society grasped by the search for creative ethical solutions to the connected pasts of French colonialism.<sup>46</sup> And yet, these non-European figures remain as mere traces in Foucault's argument, as if they cannot be imbued and animated with a life that will allow them to speak with and to his own ethical inquiry into European modernity. Are they ultimately stick figures that allow the European-modern ethos to be painted in more vivid colors?<sup>47</sup> Do they, (as Kant would have it), fall short of the ethical adeptness required to dialogue on the contemporary world?

With this in mind, it is instructive to consider Partha Chatterjee's critique of Foucault's essay, *What is Enlightenment?* Chatterjee notes that Foucault ignores Kant's

---

<sup>39</sup> Foucault is explicit about his focus on Europe. See, for example, Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 313-314.

<sup>40</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self," 283.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), xvi-xxvi.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 396-397.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 781-782.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 777-778.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 422.

<sup>46</sup> *Postcolonialism*, 397.

<sup>47</sup> And why is it that Foucault grounds his notion of race war primarily between and amongst Europeans?

curtailment of those who are qualified to exercise their reason to legitimate “experts”.<sup>48</sup> In terms of my above reading of Kant, one could say that Chatterjee uses this silence to open up a Kantian-like question about who, exactly, can be said to possess sufficient ethical adeptness to engage critically with modern experience, except that Chatterjee cedes the ground to the once “grotesque” Indians. Subjects of the colonial world, Chatterjee notes, were never seen as producers but rather as consumers, and so they were never really enfranchised into the universal domain of rational inquiry, a domain that from the beginning was colored by racial difference.<sup>49</sup>

Chatterjee’s point is that colonial-modern governance never impelled an ethos of the creative making of the present self; the colonized were rarely considered by the European experts of progress to be productive subjects in their own right, i.e. autonomous subjects able to create critical knowledge of the modern experience. And in his own way, Foucault enunciates from the position of the colonizer: after all, someone still has to have the peculiar and privileged power to declare the figure of the “human” extinct on his own terms. Indeed, disenfranchised from modernity, Chatterjee argues that it is no surprise that ethical inquiry amongst the colonized has to be pursued through a dialogue with the subjects and experiences of their un-modern/non-colonized past.<sup>50</sup> Foucault allows only one exception of this kind: it is acceptable to stage an imagined dialogue with the ancient Greeks.

When all is said and done, non-European times and spaces are used by Foucault as matter to feed a French-European critique of a non-colonial France-Europe. In this way, Foucault’s ethical inquiry assumes a monologue amongst European intellectuals, or at least, amongst those who are willing to work within the “limit-attitude” of modernity despite how this ethos might alienate them from their own groundings.

### **Glissant’s maroon**

An instructive place to enter into Glissant’s excerpts of Caribbean discourse is his valuation of (effectively French) post-structuralism:

I experience at the same time a feeling of the ridiculous and a feeling of the extreme importance of these ideas. For instance, on the subject of the destabilizing of the text and “its” author ... in our lived modernity these issues have no bearing on us. We need to develop a poetics of the “subject” if only because we have been too long “objectified” or rather “objected to”. And if I say that this seems important to me, it is because these queries relate to our deepest preoccupations. The text must for us (in our lived experience) be destabilized, because it must belong to a shared reality, and it is perhaps at this point that we actually relate to these ideas that have emerged elsewhere. The author must be demythified, certainly, because

---

<sup>48</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Talking About Modernity in Two Languages,” in *A Possible India. Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford, 1998), 273.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 281.

he must be integrated into a common resolve. The collective “We” becomes the site of the generative system, and the true subject.<sup>51</sup>

I want to take from this quote the challenge it poses to ethical inquiries that work within the monological narrative of the European-modern posited, effectively, by Foucault and critiqued by Chatterjee. Redolent of Kant’s arguments about practical reason, the lived experience of Glissant’s contemporary but un-modern subjects is a source of an original and valid ethical inquiry into present conditions. Glissant alludes to techniques that resonate with Foucault’s immanent critique of the “limit-attitude” of modernity, but at the same time, Glissant refutes the assumption that such techniques only operate on modern temporality and the stadial history that this temporality smuggles in.

In effect, Glissant challenges the spatial and temporal grounding of ethical inquiry within the European-modern. He shifts these grounds from the solid citizenship of European-continental soil to the tides and turbulence of the Caribbean archipelago represented under the sign of Créolité. First and foremost, Glissant grounds this inquiry within the uprooting forced upon various peoples through the European colonization of the Caribbean, foremost of which are the genocide of the indigenous peoples and the shipments of enslaved Africans. But at the heart of it all, for Glissant, is the way in which the meaningful pursuit of self-determination by uprooted Africans in Martinique has been consistently “overdetermined” by France.<sup>52</sup>

Glissant rehearses the narrative of overdetermination on three levels. On a political level, lasting emancipation was delivered to Martinique not through revolutions of the enslaved (which were defeated during the Napoleonic era) but courtesy of the French Republic in 1848. The author of emancipation, Victor Schoelcher, was elected to the legislative assembly in Martinique shortly after. In 1946 the island ceased to be a colony by being legally incorporated into the Département d’outre-mer. On an economic level, Glissant details a parallel set of stages: first, from the sugar plantation economy to the “pseudoproduction” era of the nineteenth century where French sugar beet took over from Caribbean cane leaving the latter’s plantation class to be subsidized by the metropolis; second, to the “exchange” economy of the Department era wherein public funds are funneled to the Island for the private benefit of a few ruling class and subsequently re-exported back to the metropolis.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Glissant reveals how these political-economic trajectories of French accumulation result in a “corresponding absence of accumulation in collective cultural acquisition”.<sup>54</sup> The plantation system, heinous though it was, provided the space for a nascent cultural domain of struggle that was pulverized with the rise of the sugar beet industry to be replaced only with the passive consumerism of departmental incorporation.<sup>55</sup> In sum, France has over-determined

---

<sup>51</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 149.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 88. For some thoughts on the particularity of the Francophone Caribbean as it affects Glissant’s work see Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles,” *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 637-648.

<sup>53</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 102.

Martiniquean self-determination by ensuring an “absence of independent creativity for resolving social conflicts”.<sup>56</sup> What has been granted instead is a vicarious – political-legal – attachment to the fecund liberty, equality and fraternity of the mother country’s national history.

With this diagnosis of the official history of Martinique, Glissant enters into what is termed in Caribbean literature the “quarrel over history”. The quarrel’s epicenter can be found in the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul’s retrieval in 1962 of English travel writer J.A. Froude’s damning opinion of the West Indies written in 1887: “History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies”<sup>57</sup>. To address the symptoms of contemporary Martiniquean malaise, Glissant, like many Caribbean writers, questions the utility of comparatively framing the Caribbean past through the tropes of History beloved by European colonizers and settlers, tropes that can only paint a monotone narrative of conquest.<sup>58</sup>

Glissant’s own response is to make disturbing the transparency of the French subject - transparent because monotone.<sup>59</sup> Similar to Fanon, Glissant speaks of the trap of French citizenship in that when it is “granted” it is imposed as the “only source of light” thus making visible the “other” only as the luminescence of the French subject.<sup>60</sup> Private property and the private individual are, for Glissant, reflections of this blinding transparency which make it impossible to retrieve a collective memory of meaningful liberation for African-Caribbeans.<sup>61</sup> Hence, he notes, “we have acquired a taste for obscurity – that which is not obvious.”<sup>62</sup>

And this is where Glissant shifts the ground of ethical inquiry towards the potential solidarities of the enslaved. Invoking Kema Brathwaite’s oft quoted phrase, “the unity is submarine”<sup>63</sup>, Glissant reclaims the “transversality” of the sea from the discrete rocks of islands incorporated into the French polity so as to recover the trails of African bones “weighed down with ball and chain and thrown over”.<sup>64</sup> Against the homogenizing history of the “expansionist plunder of the West” Glissant uses these alternative submarine traces to claim a diverse past of the Caribbean predicated upon the “political and armed resistance of people”.<sup>65</sup>

Because of the near genocide of the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, the figure that embodies this resistance, to the extent that it occupies its high-water mark, is

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Randolph Hzekiah, “Martique and Gadeloupe: Time and Space,” in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Vol.1, Hispanic and Francophone Regions* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994), 383.

<sup>58</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>63</sup> Edward Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974).

<sup>64</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 66-67.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 98.

the maroon - the enslaved African who escaped from the plantations to the dense and rugged interior and there developed tenuously self-determining communities.<sup>66</sup> In fact, I would argue that the maroon is the figure at the centre of Glissant's ethical inquiry; it is the living body of the maroon, demonized and outcast in French memory, whose melanin splits and fractures the totalizing and blinding light of Republican history.

I shall return to the maroon presently. First, though, it is necessary to examine how Glissant makes the lived experience articulated by enslaved peoples disturb and counter the monologue of a monotone French citizenship.<sup>67</sup> As a "creole" language, the orality of the enslaved functions as camouflage vis-à-vis the slave owner. In doing so, creole affirms the inescapable cultural diversity rather than proclaimed homogeneity of societies arising out of plantation slavery. Whereas slaves are supposed to be mute brutes and whereas only the slave masters are supposed to be sufficiently adept to govern the colony in technical and ethical terms, creole provides the communicative vessel for a re-telling of the Caribbean past through folktale.<sup>68</sup>

From the point of view of the metropolis, folktale is sacrilegious in its approach to the past because it is grounded in experiences suppressed by the written word of French law and decree. Folktale dissolves the imperial chronology that homogenizes the past by the authority of modern rationality and manifests, in its place, the humbler slave/peasant temporality of day and night. Instead of clarifying myth for the purposes of writing an enlightened and ultimately modernist narrative of cumulative cause and effect in the service of conquest, the folktale "animates ordinary symbols to proceed to approximations".<sup>69</sup>

Through these diversions, folktale delivers the protective space for enslaved Africans and their descendents to actively (rather than vicariously) cultivate a sense of a self-determining collective, a sense which is of course at the heart of ethical inquiry. Specifically, folktale does this by outlining "a landscape that is not possessed" by the French-modern narrative - the landscape of the maroon:

The forest is the last vestige of myth in its present literary manifestation. In its impenetrable nature history feeds our desire. The forest of the maroon was thus the first obstacle the slave opposed to the transparency of the planter. No way forward in the trees.<sup>70</sup>

Articulated thus, Glissant believes that folktale is "an unconscious body of knowledge through which the popular consciousness can potentially assert both its rootlessness and

---

<sup>66</sup> For example, *Ibid.*, 220, 248.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-77.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 127-128. It should be noted that for Glissant the trickery element of creole is productive only in a particular context and it must move beyond this stage once the plantation system is dismantled. Glissant argues that creole in Martinique has become captured by French culture and presently possesses little capacity for resistance; *Ibid.*, 125-127, 132. This is a major theme for Glissant, however, I cannot examine it in further depth here.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

its density.”<sup>71</sup> It is important to dwell on this sentence because, as I shall show, while it provides the key to understanding Glissant’s re-grounding of ethical inquiry in the condition of Créolité it also exposes a tension in Glissant’s decolonizing discourse.

The above invocation of roots can be linked to Glissant’s engagement with the Negritude movement of his fellow Martiniquean, Aimé Césaire.<sup>72</sup> Negritude expresses the centrality of feelings of exile and desires to somehow redeem the Africanity of the Caribbean enslaved and their descendents. But for Glissant while this is an unavoidable foundation for orality, it is impossible to authentically reconstitute the original African condition, hence his replacement of a personalized and filial “roots” with the more impersonalized and malleable term, “density”.<sup>73</sup> The task, as he sees it, is to use the opacity (a kind of density) of orality for the “re-integration” of the collective self on Martiniquean soil.<sup>74</sup>

Thus the grounds of Glissant’s inquiry are neither African nor European – they are American in the sense of a new articulation of cultures, languages, pasts, and peoples. This reintegration, while paradoxically based upon redeeming the submarine history of slavery, must nevertheless proceed as a pan-Caribbean project of collective self-determination.<sup>75</sup> To this end, Glissant then gestures to the indigenous American presence, not just echoing in most of the islands as genocide but, beyond that, towards the living peoples of the continent in order to claim a different Americas to that conquered by Europeans and held sway over by US interests.<sup>76</sup> By these strategies, and in defiance of a “universalizing and reductive humanism”, Glissant promotes a “theory of opaque structures – the irreducible density of the other in cross-cultural relationship”,<sup>77</sup> in a word, Créolité. This relationship is bound by an ethics of collective self-determination but one which refuses to give the ground over solely to any one ethnicity, race, nationality or civilization.

Indeed, in so far as any national project has at its heart the process of collective self-determination, Glissant refuses both the liberal and post-structuralist national narrative that allows ethical conversation only at a particular dialectical moment in modernity: “one can reject the nation, if one already has one.”<sup>78</sup> For Glissant, his ethical inquiry is not driven by a desire to “catch up” and vicariously repeat European history; in fact, it is propelled by the attempt to make opaque the translucent and totalizing light of European History. The orality which drives this opaque project is predicated upon the promotion of diversity and cross-cultural poetics – of dialogue. Hence to the extent that collective self-determination is a national project, it is not based on a totalizing energy that necessitates exclusion of peoples and pasts either in temporal or spatial dimensions. Rather, it is an alter-ethos: “a form of disalienated relationship with the other, who in this way becomes

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>72</sup> See Ibid., 153-154.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 139. Again, this is where Glissant distances himself from Césaire.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 218.

our fellow man.”<sup>79</sup> And with this in mind, we could return to Glissant’s musing on the semi-usefulness of poststructuralism that I began this section with.

But let us instead return to Glissant’s move away from roots towards density/opacity with regards to which I have signaled a certain tension. With the exception of tolerating the traditions of the ancient Greeks as worthy interlocutors, “roots” is a condition that is anathema to the European-modern ethical inquiry to the extent that the fundamental subjective condition of modernity is considered to be rootlessness. Hence any enunciation of roots must be interpreted as epistemologically or ethically suspect. In Glissant’s writings, the figure of the maroon – the living African retention that embodies resistance and self-determination – stands out, but sorely, as a root. What is it that makes Créolité opaque to the European-modern? Is it fundamentally the fracturing, flux and re-cohering of multiple social relations in new constellations? If so, then Créolité expresses a Caribbean experience that, as Sidney Mintz put it, is precociously modern rather than pre-modern.<sup>80</sup> Precociously conversable/convertible... but recognizably (and safely) modern. Or does this opacity fundamentally arise out of the African root and its wellsprings of un-modern modes of spiritual, psychical and material resistance? With these questions in mind, let us now imagine what the figurative interlocutors of Kant, Foucault and Glissant would say to each-other.

### **The enlightened philosopher, the creative work of art and the maroon converse**

Kant’s philosopher turns firstly to Foucault’s artistic self and protests that the later is not creating but rather colonizing ethical inquiry in the name of a purely modern subjectivity. The philosopher requests a dialogue that is grounded in the disjuncture between the un-modern and the modern rather than a monologue of modernity. In response, the artistic self protests that it cannot create anything of worth from the brittle and racist figure of the human modeled by the philosopher. Indeed, absent of that human archetype beloved by the philosopher, the Greeks are just Greeks and neither moderns nor pre-moderns. In any case, there is only the subjection to the “now” through which to practice the liberatory art of relentless critique. The philosopher concedes, to a point, but retorts that is strange that this relentlessness is allowed to sweep up the Greeks of the past but not the non-European “out there” of the present. They fall silent, both tacitly agreeing that the continued existence of an indistinct space of non-European temporality, one that is not quite modern but nevertheless contemporaneous, is difficult to speak about.

Using the maroon as a mouthpiece, Glissant dares to valorize these other spaces and sequences as prime sites for learning about and thinking through a colonial modernity. Glissant accepts that Foucault’s Greek ethos of creativity resonates in the vernacular of creole – but only as another patois, not as a mother tongue. Glissant is warmed by Kant’s relationality but roundly decries its grotesque limitation of human dignity. What is out there, argues Glissant, extra to the experience of the European

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 250, 219.

<sup>80</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: The Caribbean Region as Oikoumene,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 289-311.

philosopher and its work of art, is neither sub-humanity, nor untimeliness, nor a waiting room of history. It is, rather, a crossroads of relational experiences where, upon arrival, Europeans would have to speak with provincial humility.<sup>81</sup> Here, there is no highway of liberal peace originating from Europe to loop back upon itself. And here, liberation does not lead to sexuality; rather, the patriarch of the nuclear family is already crossed by a slave master imposed from the outside that breaks families.

Listening to these conversations the maroon becomes animated and cannot help but take back control of its voice and speak to Glissant. But you yourself must remember the grounds upon which I turned my ethics into practical reason and created my own arts of liberation. It was in the Palmares of Brazil where we Africans of many ports and natives of those hinterlands set up armed communities in the late sixteenth century that defied the Portuguese for a hundred years; it was in Cockpit country and the Blue Mountains of Jamaica where we Ashanti sounded our Abeng in the wars of the 1700s; and it was in the rugged interior of St Domingue where in 1791 we Kongos again heard the call, this time from Dutty Boukman, binding us through Vodou rituals to freedom or death. My figure, says the maroon to Glissant, stands for the living African retentions at the beating heart of your cross-cultural relation. I am not to be outlined, ultimately, as another kind of modern, no matter how precocious I might sound. I refuse to be possessed by a new subject glued together, for modernity's sake, from a set of social fractures and historical discontinuities. Neither universal progress nor relentless critique power the living rhythm of my un-modern and non-European pasts. So when I speak because of and through these pasts, I manifest the possibility for a dialogue. Not a modernist monologue in another disguise.

The philosopher and work of art are now entertaining the possibility that this African-Maroon might help them to overcome the unreasonable qualification of reason amongst humans and to open wider the small rip already made into a greater political-aesthetic pluriverse. And they are even suggesting to Glissant that he follows the immanent possibilities residing within his own words: you must draw out what the maroon fundamentally represents, and to do that you need to remember how you claimed that Rastafari corresponded to Negritude. You posed the question to those who might follow you thus: "...can [she/he] who has produced [the] theory of Negritude accept the Rasta who applies it in a concrete way?"<sup>82</sup> Both were a "barbaric invasion", you said, into the "intellectual dreamland of the learned". Why not set *all* the captives free?

Upon hearing this provocation, the African-Maroon rejoices and exclaims, this is the root of it all! Rastafari is grounded in Mount Zion not Babylon. Philosopher, you were right when you claimed that Africas travelled with the Africans to the Americas. But you must be enlightened to over-stand that these travelling grounds have their own living-not-artificial, iterated- not-discarded and transmitted-and-transformable feelings of the sublime and the beautiful. From these grounds can be sighted both the dignity of humanity and the indignity of the European Enlightenment. Work of art, follow your

---

<sup>81</sup> On humility, in this respect, see Rolando Vázquez, "Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time," *Sociological Research Online* 14, no. 4 (2007), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/4/7.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 68-69.



intuition that, despite the smugness of French citizenship, the liberation struggle was/is unfinished business. So why not take bolder steps to build your creation with cross-cultural relationalities that are not illuminated by the all-blinding foil of the Greeks. Cross the patriarch with the slave master; put Europe to one side and cross India with Africa. After all, one of our first Rasta, Leonard Howell, enjoyed visitations in pre-war Jamaica from the spirit of that great Indian sage, Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>83</sup> Set all the captives free from the bind of the European-modern. Then perhaps, meditates the African-Maroon, the learned will wake from their intellectual dreamland to experience the thrill and awe of dialogue.

---

<sup>83</sup> See Robert Hill, *Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions In The Early Rastafarian Religion* (Chicago: Frontline Distribution International, 2001).