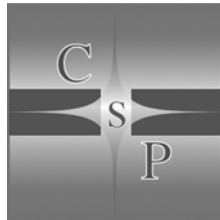


Shifting the Geography of Reason

Shifting the Geography of Reason
Gender, Science and Religion

Edited by

Marina Paola Banchetti-Robino
and Clevis Ronald Headley



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FOREWORD

“Shifting the Geography of Reason” - that is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA). It was dreamt up on the island of Jamaica in 2002 at the University of the West Indies at Mona during a series of discussions on what it means to be human after the restrictions placed on such a concept by modern conquest and colonization. The organization was officially founded in Barbados in 2004 at the first international conference. The importance of a “south to south” dialogue and the need to recognize creolization as hallmarks of the modern Caribbean were leitmotifs of the meeting. And more, the ongoing commitment to the value of *ideas* was made particularly poignant by our realization that we were meeting at a time in which, more than ever, there was international affirmation of the desire for colonized people not to think. World events seem to make such an assessment an indictment on the epoch.

“The people in the Caribbean are not interested in theory,” an agitated scholar once told me. I couldn’t accept his conclusion. It was a contradiction in terms. He was, after all, born in the Caribbean and grew up there before departing to the United States to be educated. But even with that, wasn’t *he* included in the “people in the Caribbean”? Was not *I* also included, with my origins on the island of Jamaica and my complex childhood in the Bronx, New York, among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Trinidadians, Haitians, and Antiguans, in neighborhoods invariably designated “black”?

Contemporary thought has a neurotic element in intellectual communities such as those of the Caribbean. The intellectual is treated by most critics as anathema to “the people.” One seems to be of the people so long as one does not think. When thinking begins, it is as if one were plucked out of the crowd and pulled up among the silvery glimmer of the clouds. This strange analytical contradiction of identity and performance, where one cannot *think* as a Caribbean person without being defined out of one’s community, has an additional negative consequence of making thought always external and dominating. Intellectuals supposedly come from the United States, Canada, and the Western European nations (especially France, England, and Germany), and what is left for Caribbean peoples is to celebrate the gospels that come every now and then from whomever is the most influential intellectual from up North, or North-by-northeast.

We find ourselves in already familiar “geographical” terrain. We *know* that there is thinking in the South, but the appearance of such thinking depends on neurotic conditions. How can such activities become visible in the bodies of people who challenge the scope of conditions of visibility that have been treated as completed by those who once colonized them and, in many cases, especially at the epistemological level, continue to do so? How can they demand more after announcements of there being nothing “outside” of the orthodoxy from above, from the political matrices of the North and its colonizing forces?

It is by now a well known adage that although it is important to change the material conditions of enslavement, those who inherit the new order would duplicate past evils if they cannot think otherwise. The world of knowledge, both a function of and an effect on the social world on which even culture is built, has the consequence of generating *kinds* of people. One project of the modern world has been the effort to create “happy” colonized people. Caribbean intellectuals from Anténor Firmin, José Martí, and Marcus Garvey through to C. L. R. James and Frantz Fanon very astutely realized that as an obscene project. Connected to such a project is the notion of dependency; that some people should depend on other kinds of people for ideas to give meaning to their experience. What would the Caribbean be like, they seemed to ask, if the people there did not depend upon Europe for the legitimacy of their thought?

In 1984, Audre Lorde, a poet and scholar who stood among the best sages of the Caribbean, responded, in her collection *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. The result of this insight has, however, been both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has been a supporting premise against Eurocentrism, against the dialectics of recognition in which things European and white are better than the rest of the world. But on the other hand, it has also served as a rallying cry against theory, a form of activity that is supposedly exclusively Western. Part of the recovery and constructive work of Caribbean philosophy is to show that the latter thesis is false. The reader should notice that I used the words “recovery” and “constructive” here. The former is used because it is simply false that theory belongs solely to European civilizations. Connected to Lorde’s metaphor, we would be remiss to forget that slaves brought tools of their own to the New World and the indigenous people had their own tools prior to conquest. In other words, *tools* do not only belong to the master. The constructive side takes this insight further: Why should slaves and former slaves busy themselves with dismantling the master’s house? Why not use whatever resources at their disposal in the service of building alternative houses, other homes? Wouldn’t there be a changed meaning of the Big House, of the Master’s House?

Thought from what Enrique Dussel has so aptly called “the underside of modernity” has unfortunately suffered stratification in the role of negative critique at the end of the twentieth century. Much of this has been because of the impact of postmodernism and forms of disciplinary nihilism, where there is greater preference for criticism over the creation of new thought. As we have just seen, such a path involves abandoning the possibility of building alternative homes of thought. Put differently, just as human beings need shelter or places in which to live, we also need such equivalents for our thought. Ideas dwell across the ages in the concepts and institutions human beings have built.

It is a goal of the Caribbean Philosophical Association to build a home for the ideas of, and about, Caribbean peoples. To achieve that goal, the Association has assembled an international community under the following mission:

The Caribbean Philosophical Association is an organization of scholars and lay-intellectuals dedicated to the study and generation of ideas with a particular emphasis on encouraging South-South dialogue. Although the focus is on engaging philosophy that emerges in the Caribbean, membership is not limited exclusively to scholars with degrees in philosophy, and any region and historic moment is open to the exchange of ideas. Similarly, membership in the organization is not limited to professional scholars. Anyone with an interest in theoretical and philosophical work can become a member. Finally, the Caribbean Philosophical Association is also dedicated to assisting with the development of institutions that would preserve thought in the Caribbean and facilitate the creation of new ideas.

The motto of “Shifting the Geography of Reason” converges with this statement. For how reason has been mapped out across the modern epoch has been such that much of what the CPA does will seem strange to organizations whose goal is to affirm the hegemony of the order of things as constituted by the North and the colonizing project of that kind of modernity. Such an order depends, for instance, on a divide along national and linguistic lines. A terrible consequence of this has been the great distances between the Anglophone and Latin Caribbean in spite of their geographical proximity. In effect, the geography of culture, of language and knowledge, proves greater than the challenges of the sea.

A catalyst in Anglo-Caribbean philosophy has been the publication of Paget Henry’s great work, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* in 2000, which was the first recipient of the CPA’s Frantz Fanon Prize for Outstanding Work in Caribbean Thought. That work brought momentum to the question of Caribbean philosophy by offering a set of ideas that offered a home for at least a portion of this region’s thought. Formulating concepts such as

historicism and poeticism and examining the dialectic through which questions of Caribbean intellectual identities were unfolding, the text also advanced the value of “creolization,” in which the African ancestral voices were recognized as well as the European ones. Henry’s recent work also involves lobbying for the Indo-Caribbean influences, and his arguments have set the stage for exploring what indigenous influences remain and continue to contribute to our understanding of Caribbean reality in places such as Guyana and along the Gulf of Mexico. That this text won the CPA’s Frantz Fanon prize stimulated a reflection on how linguistic gaps can be bridged in the creolized reality of the New World. Fanon was, after all, Martinican, and it was the French who formulated the notion of Latin American. It is quite odd that Fanon is not studied as a Latin American or Latin Caribbean. In response to this observation, the CPA board made a decision at its Barbados 2004 meeting to meet across the linguistic boundaries of the Caribbean and thus held the second annual meeting in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the Association was generously hosted by The Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe. Two books won the Fanon prize at the meetings in Puerto Rico: Sibylle Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) and Alejandro J. De Oto’s *Fanon: política del sujeto poscolonial* (Mexico City, Mexico: El Centro de Estudios de Asia y Africa, El Colegio de México, 2003). The significance of a book that engages the ideas that emerged out of the Haitian Revolution and a book on one of the most revolutionary thinkers produced by the Caribbean, and that both were Francophone topics written in English and in Spanish, respectively, exemplified the themes of creolization, geography, and language that emerge in the effort to build a home for Caribbean thought. The obvious solution was not only to award both books but to make it policy that there be three Fanon prize awards, where each will go to a book in English, Spanish, and French, with room for more as circumstances demand.

Part of shifting the geography of reason requires fighting the forces of disciplinary decadence. Reductionistic academics treat their disciplines as closed affairs. Their work is simply the application of a sewn-up method. This unfortunate attitude has been one that has dominated much recent philosophy. It is a plague on North American and European philosophy, where not only are such notions of method treated by the majority of scholars as locked in the divide between Anglo-analytical philosophy and European Continental philosophy, but also in the credo of legitimacy-as-thought-coming-solely-from-the-North. This affliction is not limited to philosophers. It infects many other disciplines as well. The result is a form of decadence in which scholars with such views would stand appalled at the diversity of ideas and their sources in the

Caribbean, and by implication, the Caribbean Philosophical Association. We see the dialectical unfolding of double consciousness. One world, treating itself as complete, announces its universality. Those trapped in its claims of particularity can see that their dominators have confused their own particularity as universality. The North announces universality; the South, when freed from the shackles of North-centrism, sees only a conflated particularity hovering above them, and begins to question, as well, the notions of “above” and “below.” A philosopher from the North may look at a meeting of South-South thinkers and conclude with an answer to a question that is entirely out of place: “Only some of the participants are philosophers; only half or so have doctorates in philosophy.” Is philosophy only an activity for people with degrees in the discipline? And even if so, does it follow that philosophers could only learn from people within their own discipline? In my own work, I have characterized this mentality (this attitude) as “disciplinary decadence.” It is when thought becomes closed that the teleological life of thinking collapses into the pure assertion of disciplinary correctness. It is philosophers who criticize other scholars for not being philosophers; historians who criticize others for not being historical; literary scholars who do the same; and natural scientists who do likewise. In response, I have suggested that scholars engage in a form of teleological suspension of their disciplines. This is a paradoxical act of invigorating thought by going beyond disciplinary boundaries. It is to do what, ironically, many philosophers in the past did. For instance, most of the Western philosophical canon consists of individuals who were either not formally trained philosophers or who were not recognized in their time as philosophers because of their unorthodox ideas.

It would be an error, however, to take it that the teleological suspension of disciplinarity simply means becoming interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity requires the disciplines to meet as whole units or discrete members of a distinct collective. What teleological suspension suggests is the possibility of creating something that is not simply a reinscription of what precedes it; it may mean to create *new* disciplines, or, perhaps one day, going beyond disciplinarity itself.

Although many have tried to “domesticate” or “discipline” Caribbean thinking, a cursory study of Caribbean intellectual life would reveal the importance of that multifaceted term “writer.” Like the creolization and the realities of labor in the Caribbean, the intellectual also wears many hats, works through many disciplines, all of which are guided by the teleological force of thought itself. In the Caribbean, it is admitted that although it is important to know where one is going, it is always a good idea to formulate a few alternative routes.

The reader now holds in her or his hand the first volume of papers in the *Shifting the Geography of Reason* project. On behalf of the CPA, I would like to thank our Vice-President Clevis Headley and our Secretary of Publications and Translations Marina Banchetti-Robino for editing this important first in a series of volumes on this important question. Special thanks also are in order for Trudy Edwards, graduate student in the Ph.D in Comparative Studies program at Florida Atlantic University, who did an absolutely magnificent job of formatting and assisting with the editing. Thanks are also in order to the following readers who assisted in refereeing the essays: Professors Sika Dagbovie, Louis Duno Gottberg, Glynne Griffith, and Elena Machado. I would also like to thank the contributors for their dedication and, above all, the continued benefit of their ideas. The struggle for freedom continues in the Caribbean and most of the world. It is our hope that these and subsequent modest contributions will play their part in that long journey that took humanity from the club to the word, from mere force to the fragile yet momentous, flickering light of the marriage between deed and intelligence.

A so wi go!

Lewis Gordon

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CHARTING THE SHIFTING GEOGRAPHY OF REASON

MARINA PAOLA BANCHETTI-ROBINO
AND CLEVIS RONALD HEADLEY

The present volume emerged from the first annual meeting of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, which took place in Barbados in May 2004. Professor Lewis Gordon, in his preface to this volume, has already foregrounded the historical significance of that meeting and offered insightful commentary on the organization's resolute beginnings and admirable mission. What we shall do in this introduction is touch on issues that variously inform the essays constituting this volume.

Before plunging in, we consider it crucial to make some preliminary remarks. To begin, we deny any allegiance to contemporary announcements of the end or disintegration of reason. Nor do we recognize any worth in maligning reason for the sake of a currently fashionable nihilism.

Of course, we would be equally remiss if we failed to acknowledge what could be correctly called the "crisis of reason," even if we did not interpret this crisis as purveying the immanent demise of reason. As appropriate to any crisis, we prefer to speak in terms of reason as being in a critical condition such that it is vulnerable to serious questioning and rethinking. We pursue this option in order to underscore that reason does not enjoy uncontested status.

We live in an era of critical consciousness, an epoch saturated with the awareness that formal systems of thought are vulnerable to incompleteness; we understand that no formal system of thought can conclusively establish its own validity. The awareness of unfulfilled foundational epistemic projects has led some thinkers to affirm the impossibility of any stable foundations upon which to justify formal systems of thought. Various developments in recent intellectual

history (e.g., Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Einstein's relativity, Gödel's incompleteness theorem) have lent credence to the idea of the fragility of reason. They have also promoted assaults against the epistemological and foundational majesty of reason.¹

A more direct assault against the Enlightenment conception of reason was orchestrated by the Frankfurt School triumvirate of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, who variously protested against the totalizing and dominating effects of instrumental rationality.² According to this critique, the technological conception of reason gives rise to a one-dimensional world. Technological reason is an enemy of the imagination and facilitates regimented modes of thought that all but render any alternative hopelessly impractical, if not altogether impossible.

Feminist theory has also engaged critically with reason. Feminist critiques have focused on the masculine gendering of reason, namely, the masquerading of reason as an exclusively male prerogative and, consequently, as beyond the existential and analytical reach of women. Here, feminist theorists critique the idea that men are the agents of reason and objectivity, whereas women, as the opposite of men, are the agents of emotion and of the flesh and are, hence, incapable of achieving objectivity. We confess our allegiance with feminist efforts to question the traditional exaltation of a masculine reason at the expense of women who were, thereby, excluded from the various mechanisms of knowledge production. We consider this project to be not a rejection of reason itself but, rather, an attempt to resist the use of reason as a tool of domination. We recognize a trace of the notion of "shifting the geography of reason"³ in these feminist critiques to the extent that they promote the idea of the embodiment of thought while distancing themselves from the idea of thought as objectivity. This view certainly intimates the prospect of relocating reason in the corporeality of the thinking subject, rather than in some disembodied and immaterial realm.

Slogans can be very powerful as a source for generating collective affirmation, but they can be equally misleading. Thus, in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding concerning our position, we wish to contextualize the idea of "shifting the geography of reason" and to reiterate our rejection of contemporary denigrations of reason.

One current tendency that is of some relevance to the general theoretical thrust of this volume is that of framing the geography of reason as a multicultural imperative about the nature of thought. As an example of this, it is worth calling

attention to Richard Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*.⁴ Here, Nisbett claims that "human cognition is not everywhere the same,"⁵ and he seeks to demonstrate the existence of cognitive, as well as experiential, differences between Easterners and Westerners. We mention Nisbett primarily to underscore the prevalence of the tendency to link reason with geography. However, since our immediate concern in this volume is not cognitive pluralism or relativism, we will forgo any further investigation into the nature of cognition and inference.

Within the history of Western philosophy, thinkers ranging from Hume to Kant and Hegel have consistently denied the non-European capacity for rational thought. For these thinkers, reason's natural home is within the geographical boundaries of Europe. We do not wish to engage in what some call the "bashing of dead white males." Nor do we seek to pursue simplistic and unimaginative denunciations of these thinkers as being obviously racist. Although their racism is quite palpable and perhaps even banal, the more important and significant approach is to see them as representatives of a particular epistemic style. These thinkers were confident in their pronouncements concerning non-Europeans precisely because they saw themselves as reaching conclusions that were consistent with the then reigning Western epistemic regime. Their thinking was saturated by the archetypes of this regime. Indeed, the notion of the geography of reason was surely not alien to David Hume. In his essay "Of National Characters," he states that "there is some reason to think, that all the nations which live beyond the polar circles or between the tropics are inferior to the rest of the species, and are incapable of all the higher attainments of the human mind."

Immanuel Kant confidently endorses this view, for there is not the slightest hint of doubt on his part regarding Hume's claims concerning African peoples. Associating reason with the ascent of the arts and culture, Kant enthusiastically establishes theoretical, as well as epistemological, allegiance with Hume in denouncing the pathetic cognitive condition of Africans. According to Kant:

Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a simple example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.⁶

Immanuel Eze has done a brilliant job in establishing Kant's structural transcendental linking of race and reason.⁷ Henry Louis Gates has also written that "Race and reason, ethnocentrism and logocentrism, together were used by the enlightened to deprive the black of his or her humanity."⁸

G. W. F. Hegel is equally convinced that Africa exists outside the geographic reach of reason. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* he concludes, after reviewing the ethnographic and anthropological literature of the time, that "We shall therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again. For it is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own. What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit . . ." For Hegel, since reason is nonexistent in Africa, there is no subjectivity there precisely because reason is a precondition of human agency and subjectivity. To be devoid of reason is to be a prisoner of nature and to be vulnerable to its whims. On the other hand, those who possess reason can indeed claim subjectivity and agency. They are beyond nature and are the creators of culture and civilization.

Even Edmund Husserl becomes complicit with this implicit bonding of reason, culture, philosophy, and civilization. He, too, thinks of reason in terms of territoriality, identifying Europe as the home of reason and Europeans as the guardians of reason. Commenting on the essay "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man," Christian Delacampagne writes:

It took as its point of departure the idea that Europe forms a "family" of nations united together by a "fraternal" bond, a sort of spiritual homeland that Husserl considered to enjoy an obvious superiority over all other cultures, whether those of India or China or, to take his example, that of the Papua New Guineans, whom little separated, in his view, from animality. Husserl held that European superiority was based on its tripart invention of reason, science, and philosophy.¹⁰

There is a problem, however, with normatively describing reason as purity of thought and rationality as thinking according to absolute rules of inference, and then locating reason exclusively within Europe. This compromises the transcendental status of reason because, in limiting the scope of reason to one group of people, it implies that reason cannot be a universal transcendental condition for the possibility of intelligibility. To so limit the transcendental prerogative of reason to Europe runs the risk of confining and condemning non-Europeans to irrationality or cognitive underdevelopment. We have been reminded by Hegel that people without reason are people without history – the

absence of reason inescapably entails the absence of history. So the politics of the geography of reason have been at the center of the cultural pretensions of the West for quite some time.

Of course, our goal is not to simply advocate the opposite of reason and to blindly embrace emotion, feelings, and sensuality, etc. Our aim is to transcend these limiting structural binaries and to view them in their contingency, rather than to argue in favor of a new set of rigid binaries.

Still, it seems that the idea of “shifting the geography of reason” cries out for more detailed explanation. The concept of “shifting,” regardless of context or semantic alterations, is easily understood. The more interesting task is to offer a brief exegesis of “the geography of reason.” Clearly, this metaphor is not to be understood as referring to the physical topology of the brain. Nor do we understand this metaphor to be related to battles over the jurisdiction of reason within the various academic disciplines. There is, of course, a sense in which the notion of shifting the geography of reason has implications for established disciplinary practices. The idea here, however, is not to sanction any one particular discipline as having a monopoly on reason but, rather, to encourage the transgression of disciplinary boundaries. Although this has already been done under the rubric of interdisciplinarity, within the context of this present volume, we prefer to speak in terms of disciplinary creolization or hybridization. The reader will definitely detect, in the following essays, many instances of disciplinary cross-fertilization, both with regard to the modes of analysis and interpretation and with regard the topics discussed. Consequently, we should not be surprised if this volume, produced as it is within the organizational space of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, engages in what may be called a theoretical callaloo. We do not use this term with the intention of belittling the merits of the essays herein presented. Rather, the term is used to capitalize on a style that is deeply rooted within Caribbean existence.

It bears noting that, in thus situating reason within the context of a Caribbean mode of existence, we will encounter a new set of metaphors with which we can frame alternative conceptions of reason. The European monopolization of reason has meant confining the modern figurations of reason to the visual metaphors of light and sight.¹¹ This traditional framing of knowledge within the structural matrix of vision has encouraged conceptions of knowledge in terms of accurate representation of reality, that is, in terms of images that copy reality or are in correspondence with the facts. Consistent with the motif of shifting the geography of reason, we must note how the copulation of knowledge with vision has reinforced the idea of objectivity as analogous with distance.

Detachment in terms of distance has, indeed, fortified the notion of the philosophical attitude as being synonymous with disinterested reason.

The metaphor of the geography of reason can also be construed as bearing on the relationship between the individual and the community. On the traditional Cartesian view, reason is seen as an individual possession. Reason, in this view, is not situated within a community of inquirers. Rather, it is manifested as the exercise of an individual consciousness that can serve as the justificatory basis for truth and knowledge. In this context, the notion of shifting the geography of reason includes relocating reason intersubjectively by viewing it as the achievement of a community of inquirers, rather than as that of individuals working in isolation. Work done in the field of the sociology of knowledge has gone far to advance this relocation of reason in an intersubjective space. Randall Collins reminds us, for example, that “The history of philosophy is to a considerable extent the history of groups.”¹² In fact, reason’s location in intersubjective space is primary, and the move to displace it to the privacy of the individual’s mind requires a certain degree of ontological rearranging. Collins writes that “We arrive at the individual only by abstracting from the surrounding context. It seems natural for us to do this because the world seems to start with ourselves. But the social world had to be bracketed for us to arrive at the lonely individual consciousness; and indeed it is only within a particular tradition of intellectual practices that we have learned how to construct this pure individual starting point”¹³

Closely related to the above considerations is the notion of the construction of reason. On this view, reason does not exist in a transcendent realm that is immune to contamination by the flux of the materiality and contingency of daily human existence. Thus, the idea of reason as a construction signals the fact that shifting the geography of reason is, in part, a matter of conceiving reason as something clearly embedded in our practices.

The metaphor of the geography of reason can also be interpreted literally as pertaining to physical space. Consistent with this literal interpretation, shifting the geography of reason becomes an attempt to displace the Eurocentric monopoly over reason that was discussed above and to relocate reason within a different physical space. This project of shifting the geography of reason, however, does not attempt to trade incapacities such that we invert the epistemological hegemony of the West and replace it with its equally one-dimensional and hegemonic other; rather, the task is to resist and challenge the universalistic pretense of Eurocentric particularity. Doing this does not imply becoming deaf to the European voice. Indeed, the voice of Europe is quite

discernible in this text. Rather, the aim is to replace hegemony with heteronomy and to pursue an ethic of reason. This ethically informed reason allows others, whose voices have historically been silenced, to participate in the discourse of philosophy. Hence, this participation will not dwell exclusively on the so-called perennial problems of philosophy but will also call attention to the existential concerns that emerge from the problems of human existence. Some degree of continuity will indeed be established with the Western tradition of philosophy to the extent that this shifting of the geography of reason will engage with phenomenology and further advance its naturalization; that is, it will continue the tradition of existential phenomenology by investigating the constitution of subaltern subjectivities, among other things.

We should note here that the very notion of a naturalized phenomenology that recognizes marginal subjectivities certainly conjures up geographic connotations. We recall that Husserl considered naturalism to be a threat to reason to the extent that naturalism is a form of relativism. Of course, Husserl immediately localized this threat to European culture, specifically targeting naturalism as corrosive to reason and as constituting a direct threat to the foundations of European civilization. Again, the geographical implications of Husserl's situating of reason are inescapable.

The above considerations bring us to yet another possible way of framing the notion of shifting the geography of reason. The tendency within philosophy has traditionally been to advocate the *a priori*-tivity of reason, that is, the idea of reason as the transcendental precondition of intelligibility and as irreducible to any form of materiality. Reason is, thus, situated outside the flux of materiality and human corporeality. This conception of reason obviously renders it as an ahistorical faculty, perched outside the contestability of the human realm. To shift the geography of *a priori* reason renders reason historically situated within an immanent geography of human practices. Further, this move to historicize reason by means of locating it within the developmental yet open process of human history is consistent with the project of decolonizing reason.

We speak of decolonizing reason in the sense of liberating it from the monopolistically possessive claims of the West.¹⁴ Reason has been colonized to the extent that Europeans have functioned as the material instantiation of the rule of reason. Whatever has been fashioned by Europe has been conceived as the product of reason. Hence, those who lack reason but who are desirous of it must imitate Europe. To decolonize reason is not only to free it from the possessive grasp of Europe but also to recruit reason in the service of emancipation. A decolonization of reason entails a rethinking of the

problematics of being or existence in a manner other than within the confines of the Western metaphysics of presence. We conclude that, even if we must acknowledge the impossibility of escaping the regime of the logic of sameness and identity, we can at least still aim at a decolonization of reason by strategically unsettling the binary structures of totalizing concepts and categories.

The theme of the decolonization of reason can be utilized to correct what Paget Henry refers to as the invisibility of Caliban's reason.¹⁵ If, as traditionally maintained in the West, philosophy were the paradigmatic discipline whose noble task is to establish reason as foundational to all inquiry, then the search for an Afro-Caribbean philosophy is a search for an autonomous tradition of philosophical inquiry unique to the Caribbean. But Henry claims that the career of reason in Caribbean discourse has not been within the confines of an autonomous philosophical tradition. Instead, it has been embedded within traditions of literature, history, and politics. Hence, Henry does identify a tradition of philosophy within the Caribbean. But it is a tradition that is invisible from the perspective of a philosophy that is complicit with colonialism and its substantive epistemological claims. However, this tradition can be made visible contingent upon the realization that it exists in a different textual geography, that is, the intertextual space crafted by the Caribbean thinkers who exploited to the fullest the discursive space that they were allowed to inhabit.

This shift in the geography of reason designates a transition from a textuality constituted by responses to alleged perennial problems to a textuality constituted by urgent questions of freedom, equality, and human agency. Hence, the various construals of the notion of shifting the geography of reason involve an analytical restriction of the Europeanization of reason, as well as a dethroning of exuberant transcendental conceptions of reason. The reward of this exercise has been to reconceptualize reason as historically conceived, structured, and implemented. The project of shifting the geography of reason does not undermine reason's rightful role in legislating our various practices. Instead, it liberates reason from its career in the service of domination.

Notes

1. The notion of reason herein critiqued is the Cartesian notion of *a priori* formal reason.
2. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1976) and Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
3. For more on the notion of the geography of reason, see Lewis R. Gordon, "Africana Thought and African Diasporic Studies," *The Black Scholar* 30, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter

- 2000): 25-30, and reprinted in *A Companion to African Diasporic Studies*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 590-598; see also “African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 3-50.
4. Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).
5. *Ibid.*, xvii.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) 110-111.
7. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25.
9. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by H. B. Nisbet and Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 190.
10. Christian Delacampagne, *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 26.
11. For a devastating critique of the visual conception of knowledge see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). For an excellent account of the rejection of vision in French philosophy, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
12. Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.
13. *Ibid.*
14. For more on the notion of “decolonizing” in the context of the non Western world, see Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey Ltd/Heinemann, 1986).
15. Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

CHAPTER TWO

RAMABAI ESPINET AND INDO-CARIBBEAN POETICISM

PAGET HENRY

Compared to Caribbean literature, economics, or music, the emergence of Caribbean philosophy from under the cloud of colonial invisibility that engulfed the discourses of the region is a rather late occurrence. Emerging in the early 1990s, this return of Caribbean philosophy is several decades behind the recoveries of literature and history. These differences in rates of postcolonial recovery by the region's discourses are some of the distinctive features that mark the current phase of the Caribbean epistemic order.

We can define Caribbean philosophy as the debates that arose over the legitimacy of projects of colonial domination between four major groups: Amerindians, Euro-Caribbeans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Indo-Caribbeans.¹ When defined in this manner, it is also possible to see the different rates and patterns of postcolonial recovery within the distinct ethnic spaces of Caribbean philosophy. The first to recover has been Afro-Caribbean philosophy, followed by definite stirrings in the Indo-Caribbean spaces of the field. Because of similarities in their colonial experiences, the broad historical contours of both Indo- and Afro-Caribbean philosophies are quite similar. They can be divided into four crucial phases: 1) the pre-colonial (African and Indian) heritage; 2) the Afro-Christian and Indo-Christian phases; 3) the phases of Afro-Caribbean historicism/poeticism and Indo-Caribbean poeticism/historicism; and 4) Afro-Caribbean feminism and Indo-Caribbean feminism.² The stirrings in the fields of Amerindian and Euro-Caribbean philosophy have not been as strong, and their historical contours have been quite different from those of Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean philosophies.

In this paper, I examine a work by Ramabai Espinet that takes us into the heart of Indo-Caribbean poeticism.³ The development of Afro-Caribbean poeticism and of Afro-Caribbean philosophy as a whole has been examined in my

Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy. By Caribbean poeticism I am referring to a philosophy that grasps the problem of transforming colonial societies through the establishing of discursive links between the poetics of creative writing and the cultural/symbolic dimensions of self-formative processes in these societies. Well known representatives of the school of Indo-Caribbean poeticism include V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Harold Ladoo, and Rosanne Kanhai. Afro-Caribbean poeticism has been very well represented by figures such as Wilson Harris, Sylvia Wynter, George Lamming, and Jamaica Kincaid. As we will see, there are important connections between these two schools and also with the closely related schools of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean historicism. Further, Espinet's work gives us a good idea as to what relations between these two ethnic spaces of Caribbean philosophy will be like as these two discourses continue to develop.

Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* is an extremely elegant, well conceived, and finely written novel. Its prose is not only clear but also subtly poetic. The story that it tells is a complex one. It moves with historic force across generations but at the same time is woven very concretely and passionately through the subjective lives of its main characters. The result is a very revealing slice of Indo-Trinidadian life that begins with migration from India, goes through indenture in Trinidad, decolonization, and migration to Canada because of the difficulties of living in postcolonial Trinidad. What makes this novel both special and important is the way in which it foregrounds the experiences of its female characters as Indo-Caribbeans make their difficult journey into modernity.

The heroine of *The Swinging Bridge*, Mona, is an independent, anti-establishment woman in her forties, who is living in the Canadian city of Montreal. She is a filmmaker working on a documentary on the lives Haitian women living in that city. Mona migrated to Canada in the 1970s around the age of eighteen after doing very well in high school. She found living in Trinidad difficult because of her oppressive family situation and the racial tensions in the society. Before she left, her younger years had been filled with dreams of escaping her situation. In addition to her familial and national situations, Mona is also in flight from India, her ancestral homeland. It was never viewed as a place to which she could escape. Hence her observation: "I never wanted to go to India, a place our ancestors left more than a century ago, where we heard that poverty was a way of life."⁴

Mona's rebelliousness takes the form of acting on what she feels and knows that she is against. Thus, she is opposed to marriage and will not even live with her

lover, who is a Scottish man. She is opposed to the Trinidadian prime minister, to Canadian racism, to the exclusion of women from many aspects of social life, and particularly to male use of violence to control women in families. These oppositions, much more than the things that she is for, define Mona's sense of self for most of the novel. She describes herself as a "nowarian who lives in the eye of a storm."⁵ The storm refers to the shattered inner world in which she lives – a world that had been rent by colonial, racial, and patriarchal violence. For Mona and other Indo-Caribbeans, "life in Trinidad at that time was a mess of contradictions."⁶ Separated from Trinidad and India, estranged from her family and from her own powers of motherhood, Mona is at the same time still very attached to these sites of meaning and identity. Thus, her independence is the surface of a set of ambivalences and contradictions that she will have to work through if she is to move her phase of wanderer and nowarian.

The Swinging Bridge can be read as Mona's attempt to map a course back to the worlds of her family, Trinidad and India, in order to calm the storm of her existence. The nature of this journey is working through some of the contradictions of Indo-Caribbean existence – particularly the "self-immolating" consequences of patriarchal violence on women.⁷ For most of her life in Montreal, Mona attempts to escape from this weighty and difficult challenge of making the contributions of her experiences to the defining and forging of a new Indo-Caribbean identity to replace the excessively contradictory one she inherited. This still unfinished task of writing the Indo-Caribbean into a viable existence is indeed a daunting one. Hence, it is very easy to understand Mona's reluctance to respond to the call and devote a part of her life to the making of these contributions. It is only after being forced to return to Trinidad at the request of her dying brother that she begins the creative and cosmogonic processes of remembering, genealogical reconstruction, and revisionary writing that both cracked her nowarian identity and started her contributions to the refashioning of Indo-Caribbean identities. However, to grasp more fully the importance of this turn in Mona's life, we need to take a close look at the broader social context in which Mona's Trinidad years were spent.

The Social Context

Mona's ambivalence toward an Indo-Trinidadian path for her life cannot be separated from the social dynamics of postcolonial Trinidadian society. This society was the creation of the anti-colonial insurrectionary consciousness that brought the colonial period to an end. This consciousness was a cosmogonic eruption inside the colonial order that was originary and re-creative in nature and impact. This self- and world-constituting upsurge brought into being new

conceptions of the Caribbean subject, both Indian and African, and new visions of the social order of Caribbean societies. In other words, its praxis of nation-building brought on the decline of the social order and the collapse of stereotypical identities such as those of “the negro” and “the coolie.” At the same time, through its discourses of laborism, democratic socialism, and development, it sought to redress the class problems created by colonialism. In both *The Black Jacobins* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, C. L. R. James and Frantz Fanon⁸ have given us some of the most vivid descriptions of the power of this Caribbean insurrectionary consciousness. At the same time, they have also been two of the most insightful critics of its limitations and blind spots. In spite of its powers, Fanon described it as a “rudimentary” consciousness that needed to be enlightened by a working through of its inner contradictions. He then went on to write very tellingly of the weaknesses of its spontaneity, its potential for ethnic fracturing, the weakness of its bourgeois class, and most of all its vulnerability to the neo-colonial counter strategies of Western capitalism.

In addition to the relevance of these problems identified by James and Fanon, we must add two others if we are to fully understand the difficulties that Mona experienced while living in postcolonial Trinidad. The first is a semio-linguistic contradiction in which the Caribbean national consciousness is caught that has been pointed out by a number of Caribbean poeticists such as George Lamming, Sylvia Wynter, and Wilson Harris. The second is a gendered blind spot in the eye of this consciousness that has been pointed out by Caribbean feminists such as Claudia Jones, Patricia Mohammed, Rhoda Reddock, and Ramabai Espinet.

The crucial contradiction raised by the poeticists is the continuing semio-linguistic entrapment of Caribbean subjects in the cultural and discursive practices of the colonizer. This entrapment, they have argued, persists in spite of the disruptive and re-creative powers of nation-building, the decolonizing discipline of its praxis, and its laborist projects. This postcolonial entrapment, they further argued, placed significant limitations on how radically new a social world we would be able to imagine, and how authentically we would be able to reconstruct and speak for ourselves. Lamming and others have seen getting out of this entrapment and its related problems as a distinct poetic challenge for writers of the region. Thus, Wynter makes it very explicit that it is only the cosmogonic powers of our artists that can really get us out of this specific crisis. In particular, the power of writing and other creative arts to un-name and re-name, to de-institute old selves and establish new ones, and to silence imposed voices and to reclaim lost ones – these are the poetic powers that are needed to resolve this crisis of entrapment. This creative work is the ineliminable poeticist moment in the postcolonial crisis of Caribbean societies like Trinidad.

The feminist critiques of the Caribbean nationalist consciousness have focused on its concept of the ideal citizen. They have shown that this concept is male-biased to the point of not being able to really grasp the lived experiences of women. In other words, because of its assumption of male superiority, it has been unable to recognize the full humanity of women or to see them as the equal of males. The consequences of this blind spot can be seen in the underrepresentation of women in the nation's history and in the economic discourses of development that have guided postcolonial strategies of re-construction. Whether the latter have taken a Lewisian, dependency, or neo-liberal form, they all have had to be adjusted to make adequate space for the experiences and demands of women.

As in the case of semio-linguistic entrapment, the problem of gender domination is another major issue that the nationalist ending of colonial rule has left largely unchanged. As colonial rule produced the stereotypes of "the coolie" and "the negro," patriarchal rule has produced the stereotype of the silent, dependent and devoted wife, particularly among Indo-Caribbean women. As colonial racism forced blacks to wear what Fanon called "white masks," patriarchal sexism forced women to wear what we can call male masks. These masks of silence and subordination are the gender equivalents of the racial masks of "the sambo" or "the quashie" that became classic markers of black docility and subordination. What these colonial and patriarchal caricatures have in common is their function as mechanisms that block and inhibit the inner movement of real human self-formation.

From the feminist viewpoint, it is these patriarchal limits on female self-formative processes that the birth of Caribbean nations has not been able to identify and remove. The guiding national consciousness has not been able to recognize and uproot the biased codes, psychic needs, and family practices that sustain the silenced patterns of female identity formation. Thus, here too the cosmogonic powers of nation-building will have to be supplemented by those of other creative practices. These supplements Espinet and many other Caribbean women have found in the cosmogonic or self-constituting powers of feminist creative writing. This is a discourse that has been capable of gendered feats of self-transformation that Caribbean nationalism has not been able to achieve. These un-resolved gender problems, together with those identified by Wynter, Lamming, Fanon and James, constitute the primary contradictions that postcolonial Caribbean societies are having a very difficult time working through.

The Heroine as Calherban

Against this social background, Mona's rebellious grasping of her independence becomes much more understandable. It is an oppositional and creative response to the postcolonial Trinidadian social order that is more resistant to its unresolved patriarchal problems than it is to its un-resolved class and race-ethnic problems. Moved by this strong opposition to patriarchal rule, Mona develops a strong feminist consciousness with a keen eye for the workings of male dominance and the suffering it produces for women. In particular, Mona's watchfulness is directed at the self-immolating consequences of patriarchal violence on the formation of female subjectivity. This is precisely the eye that the national consciousness lacks, its gendered blind spot. This primacy of the gender issue constitutes one of the major differences between Mona and her cousin, Bess, for whom ethno-national identity and the problem of "the two nations" of Trinidad are primary concerns. In Mona's self-understanding, these take a definite second place to the problems between men and women.

It is therefore not surprising that when we first meet Mona as an adult in Montreal, it is the wanderer and nowarian in the process of developing this feminist consciousness that we encounter. Her flight from Trinidad, her tight hold on her independence, and her embrace of feminism are her existential responses to the patriarchal violence that framed her family life in Trinidad. They are attempts to ensure that she will never be subjugated like the women she saw around her, their voices silenced, identities smothered – all behind the legitimate mask of the dutiful wife. Recalling her first love as a teenager in Trinidad, Mona remarks: "If I had married Bree, he would have been my eternal love while I turned slowly into a wife and mother." This is the fate that must be resisted at all cost. Its place is taken by a rebellious romanticism that is profoundly influenced by American movies. The fact that the two primary men in her romantic life are creole and Scottish are further indications of her unresolved problems with Indo-Caribbean patriarchy.

Mona's developing feminist consciousness is also evident in the focus of her work as a filmmaker. The expanding discourse that it produces can be seen in the extended debate that she has with her fellow filmmaker, Carene, over the inclusion of a Haitian priestess in the latter's film on the Haitian revolution. This priestess was Cecile Fatiman, who took part in the sacrifice that launched the Haitian revolution. In the course of this exchange, Mona remarks that the "thought of yet another woman edited out of history made me angry."⁹

As this Caribbean feminist voice, Mona can be seen as an instance of that colonized young woman who found no place in Shakespeare's classic account of the colonial situation in his play, *The Tempest*. Her voice is clearly different from both Caliban's and Miranda's. To include her in this interchange on her own terms, I've suggested that we call this excluded woman Calherban. Her distinct voice arises from being existentially located at the intersection of colonial and patriarchal structures of domination. In Mona's case, her distinct feminist voice arises from her location at the intersection of Indo-Trinidadian structures of colonial and patriarchal domination.

However, as Calherban, Mona's feminist consciousness has its own limitations, inner contradictions, and blind spots. Like the national consciousness that it is in conflict with, it is also a "rudimentary" consciousness that must be educated and encouraged to work through its own inner contradictions. Like Caliban, Calherban's feminist discourse is also trapped in the discourses of Prospero and Miranda and thus has semio-linguistic problems of its own. In Mona's specific case, this entrapment began with her Presbyterian upbringing and continued with her attendance at the Presbyterian, La Pastora high school. This all-girls school cultivated a sense of superiority in its students that estranged them from the rest of the Hindu community. As a young student, Mona noted that "to us, failure meant early marriage and a life bound to a washtub, scrubbing dirty clothes and smelly diapers."¹⁰ Her sense of romance was profoundly shaped by works of English literature such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tempest*, and also by American movies. The young Mona and her high school friend, Sonia, wrote letters to their "absent husbands, the singers Pat Boone and Elvis Presley."¹¹ Together, these factors in her early socialization influenced very deeply Mona's attitudes to working class life, Hindus, and Afro-Caribbeans. They are also the source of blind spots such as the class problem that her feminist consciousness must overcome.

Embedded in the subjectivities of all members of a society are varying manifestations of its basic hierarchies and their related contradictions. Consequently, some members live these contradictions more intensely than others. But each in his or her own way is capable of contributing to the resolution of these contradictions by carefully working through in an exemplary fashion the difficult forms or expressions of their presence in one's life. The significance of Mona as a character is the impact of the contributions that she is able to make from carefully examining the manifestations of the contradictions of postcolonial Trinidadian society in her life.