

“How Does It Feel to be a Problem?”: (Local) Knowledge, Human Interests, and The Ethics of Opacity

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*[A] reason against epistemological over-confidence is the knowledge that other people hold, with as much confidence, beliefs incompatible with one's own. And this motive operates in the sphere of logic, too; the very plurality of logical systems speaks against our possession of any infallible capacity to ascertain the truths of logic*¹

*Theory, then, is in a bind: it wants to be local and restricted but the structures of power – political, economic, and cultural – are national and global. To theorize the inside one must theorize the outside.*²

*I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all other books in the world.*³

The above quotations critically delineate the complex and contested terrain that I will enter in this essay. Haack, Wolin, and Wittgenstein highlight the (im)possibility of developing a critical ethical practice that is cognizant of its own epistemological (and other) limitations while simultaneously gesturing towards an engagement with those structures, discourses, and dispositions of power, privilege, and position that make such a reflexive recognition difficult to fully enact. For contemporary scholars, this situation is particularly exacerbated by the new transnational flows of culture, capital, and commerce.⁴ Moreover, writing from within a particular interrogatory intellectual practice situated in the North Atlantic academy, I must agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty when he writes “despite [our] critique of the ‘European Intellectual Tradition’ we inevitably find ourselves within (and without) this ‘fabricated’ genealogy.”⁵ In a crucial sense, the project of developing and deploying ethically responsive critical knowledges and intellectual practices carries within itself the very real possibility of its own demise prior to any such project beginning. Despite this link with the (im)possible, we find it an imperative to forge ahead with these types of projects in order to provide a conceptual and political basis for the (re)production of a transformed world.

In this respect, I feel obligated to locate myself within such a discourse.⁶ I develop the argument that follows from the position and perspective of a theologian. To this end, I hold the critical opinion that “[t]here is an implied theology operative even within the non-theological sections of” my intellectual labors.⁷ What I mean by this is that the theological preserves a mode of thinking that moves us to consider alternative possibilities for understanding human beings and belonging in the world. Indeed, it highlights the critical purchase of what the Frankfurt School critical theorist Max Horkheimer termed the “theological moment” which opens up “the space for critique, openness and renewal within secular debate”⁸ Thus, the “theological moment” that animates my critical reflections and leaves its trace on my intellectual endeavors is marked by the emergence of two texts in 1970 – James H. Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* and Gustavo

Gutiérrez's *Teología de la liberación* – and their 1973 translations into Spanish and English respectively.⁹ Cone and Gutiérrez's texts represent the critical intellectual work of theologians working across intellectual spaces grappling with the material and epistemic implications unleashed by the imperial/colonial project of the European civilizing mission and the geopolitics of knowledge.¹⁰ In other words, they operated in a space marked by the politics and power of epistemic privilege that flowed from the imperial exploits and colonial ambitions of the emergent European nation-states and founded on an epistemic framework grounded with an absolute Theological guarantee. Indeed, Charles Long provides a critical delineation of this space:

The issue of race is raised within structures of academic theology. This issue has not so much to do with the particular statements regarding race enunciated within a theology or by a particular theologian. The issue has more to do with the historical, religious, and philosophical structures of the intellectual task itself as this task implicates the meaning of race. What is the stance of a theology or a theologian when the very intellectual religious task is framed within a racist context?¹¹

As such, the organization, distribution, and legitimation of knowledge weigh heavily on all of my intellectual endeavors. And to come to grips with this “burden,” if you permit me to play on a vocabulary often deployed in imperial/colonial discourse, is an imperative for theologians – just like their counterparts in other disciplinary configurations throughout the academy. Indeed, the urgent task is to come to grips with and interrogate how we conceptualize our intellectual practices and processes. Such an undertaking requires I believe, that we go beyond traditional conceptualizations of academic forms of knowledge and risk a conversation that creates a sense of contestation around the significant terms of our discourse in a relation of solidarity with those on the underside of modernity. In the end, such a project does not necessarily hold out the guarantee of the identity of the discourse we may find ourselves when we begin to critically take account of the (re)production of knowledge. This is the risk of theology and, indeed, critical thinking in an age of globalization.

To say that the reverberations of the globalizing project that commenced, shall we say, in 1492 are still being felt in our contemporary moment is an understatement. Although the new discourses of globalization often obscure such a long and extensive genealogy of the imperial/colonial project and the attendant logic of Western civilization, I think we can all agree that the speed and depth of our current experience within this nexus is unprecedented.¹² Indeed, globalization in its latest phase poses many new challenges that cannot be adequately grasped without taking into account the extensive and pervasive history of the geopolitics of knowledge at play in our contemporary moment. In light of this situation, there has been a renewed interest by scholars, particularly those in the global South, in strengthening and enhancing alternative epistemologies. The (re)turn to epistemological positions informed by indigenous knowledge systems, although not a panacea for the total manifestations of this situation, does offer the possibility for creating a critical space for knowledge (re)production in the heart of dominant global knowledge circuits as well as serve as a challenge and corrective to the epistemic hegemony of the North. To this end, I think a renewed interrogation into the question of epistemology may prove

beneficial in enabling us to come to grips with the intensities of liberal democratic power, global capitalism, and processes of racism, classism, sexism, and dehumanization that far too often stalk those persons who were/are at the end of the beginning of the (post)modern era.

The central task I have set out to accomplish in this essay is to begin to develop the framework of a relational but analytically distinct theory of knowledge and to suggest some resulting implications for three analytics central to any subversive intellectual project in the North Atlantic academy: race, gender, and nation. This is not a simple task and as such what follows will necessarily reflect a certain level of ambiguity and abstractness that are inevitably distinguishing markers of initial attempts. I will begin by briefly giving some consideration to the particular configuration of the political and intellectual terrain of our contemporary conjuncture that critically informs this intervention. Turning next to the thought of Charles Long, I will develop the notion of the ethics of opacity and pursue some of the implications for a theory of knowledge, inspired by a trans-disciplinary archive scholarship. The relationship between ethics and epistemology to which I am aiming argues for a critical attention to how and in what manner situated communities construct worlds of meaning in *rationalizing* their existential position and condition. I intentionally use the word rationalize in order to invoke an acute understanding of a contingent cognitive mapping of the social and political world that is always already linked to a material ordering of society. Finally, I posit some implications of my attention to the critical relationality of ethics and epistemology for rethinking the analytics of race, gender, and nation in response to the urgent question: “What sorts of institutional arrangements and intellectual competencies would such an ethics of opacity suggest?”

II

To begin, there are specific moments that give rise to particular questions or bring critical observations closer to the surface of our consciousness. The formulation and writing of this essay is just such a moment. But I would like to suspend any engagement with the immediate circumstances of this moment and draw our attention to a dominant theme that frames our particular conjuncture that we commonly refer to as the present. We are living in a moment that can be characterized as one of a shot through with nostalgia. The “moment of/for nostalgia” is characterized by a pervasive *conjuring* of the past for purposes of the present. What I mean by this is that there is an intense desire to construct ideas, logics, images, and symbols of/for the past that do cultural, social, political, and economic work in the present. And it is the construction or conjuring that is important in this contemplation since – like all constructions of history – it is selective, fragmentary, and mythological. It is in this context that questions surrounding the production and reproduction of knowledge in a global world are producing a significant number of critical intellectual projects dedicated to reconsidering the imperial/colonial legacy of the Enlightenment project(s) as well as the place and position of Europe in the intellectual and political imaginary of the life of the mind. Moreover, in light of the new flows of culture, capital, and commerce in the wake of the tectonic transformations on the global scene since 1989 there has been an upsurge in intellectual activity that has sought to radicalize the questioning of the imperial/colonial intellectual imaginary in an effort to

create critical cartographies of knowledge production and reproduction for various emancipatory theoretical and political projects.

In the midst of the social and political crisis of European-American civilization of the 1960s, the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas offered his inaugural lecture at Frankfurt on the theme “Knowledge and Human Interests.” Habermas’s lecture over three decades ago marked the beginning of his systematic project to provide a “historically oriented attempt to reconstruct the prehistory of modern positivism with the systematic intention of analyzing the connections between knowledge and human interests.”¹³ Revisiting the continual attempts within the German intellectual tradition from Schelling to Husserl to renew the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment rationality, Habermas challenges the very foundation that connected and supported these different efforts at articulating “an idea of knowledge that preserves the Platonic connection of pure theory with the conduct of life” (302). For Habermas, this is the critical *aporia* of these efforts that subverted their potential from within. Indeed, through a rigorous interrogation of these efforts along with the positing of five theses on knowledge and human interests, Habermas concludes:

These practical consequences of a restricted, scientific consciousness of the sciences can be countered by a critique that destroys the illusion of objectivism. Contrary to Husserl’s expectations, objectivism is eliminated not through the offer of renewed *theoria* but through demonstrating what it conceals: the connection of knowledge and interest. Philosophy remains true to its classic tradition by renouncing it. The insight that the truth of statements is linked in the last analysis to the intention of the good and true life can be preserved today only on the ruins of ontology. (316-17)

Habermas offers the preliminary outline of a critical intellectual project and practice that challenges the reinforcing tendency of purported “emancipatory projects” in their uncritical acceptance of the theoretical conditions of a positivist objectivity. That is, the illusion that only through a “true” objectivity – an Archimedean perspective – is it possible to yield substantive knowledge that will support the advancement of human existence. For Habermas, it is only through a critical reconstruction, in the sense of “taking a theory apart and putting it back together again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it has set for itself,” of theory proper that we can develop an emancipatory knowledge with a proper critical temper.¹⁴

Although my rehearsal of Habermas’s argument is by no means exhaustive of the many permutations of his text, this brief detour highlights a central axis that informs my return to his lecture and the (re)inscription of his efforts and the lingering trace of his thought in my title. Indeed, Habermas’s turn to Max Horkheimer’s distinction between theory and critical theory and his explication and reexamination of this theme in his lecture is quite provocative for an even more radical conceptualization of a critical theory in the interests of humanity. That is, instead of holding out the possibility of radicalizing knowledge from within the epistemic tradition of the European mind that Habermas seems so intent on doing, I think it is necessary to critically rethink the epistemological privileges and positions of a certain way of knowing and a certain knowledge *episteme* that underwrites Habermas’s critical project. The task that Habermas’s project gestures toward but is

unable to face is a thoroughgoing critique of the epistemic foundation that connects the logic of the German intellectual tradition from Schelling to Husserl to Habermas. It is necessary then to think anew about a plurality of epistemic positions that have been/are overlooked, to state it politely, in a geo-political context structured on a systematic forgetting or (mis)remembering – that travels under the heading of “history” – of the imperial/colonial legacy of Europe. In such a configuration, the project of developing a critical emancipatory project is necessarily implicated in the question of ethics in the interest of those epistemic positions articulated by marginal and peripheral O/others that present the opportunity of an epistemological break with the hegemonic knowledge regimes in the modern world.

III

I have chosen the ground of ethics in wrestling with the question of epistemology for this particular endeavor in order to highlight “the very fact that ethics exist as unscientific” – that is resistant to and restrictive of the epistemic hegemony of Science proper – speaks to its critical dimension that “cannot be reduced to the disciplining of science,” indeed of the modern, rational *episteme*.¹⁵ Hence the recourse to ethics in pursuit of an emancipatory project of knowledge holds out the possibility of unmasking and “denouncing all myth, all mystifications, all superstitions” that inhere in a disciplinary and disciplining logic of our contemporary categorization and organization of knowledge, particularly in the North Atlantic academy.¹⁶ Moreover, it reminds us that the question of epistemology cannot be approached without critical attention to the question of ethics, particularly for those projects that claim to be emancipatory.

With this understanding, ethics is transformed into a critical discursive practice that evades uncritical “sentimentality and development, and pre[over]determined categories such as good and bad.”¹⁷ Ethics proper is a discourse derived from a rigorous, vigilant, and militant theoretical site of struggle. Such struggles are not merely over “values,” but rather expose the “conflicts in which [groups, formations, and classes] express their means of reproducing the very struggle that creates them – and finds emancipatory expression in their practices of resistance, pleasure, and authority.”¹⁸ Ethics thus rendered is transformed into a critical terrain that fields the necessary interrogatory practices that question the normative assumptions and methodological presuppositions in raising a critical consciousness in the ongoing battle of challenging the disciplinary dictates and epistemological demands of the modern organization of knowledge.

The ethics of opacity operates from a similar position as announced by Alain Badiou, “Ethics does not exist. There is only the ethics of (of politics, of love, of science, of art).”¹⁹ Such an ethical understanding seeks to temper the imperial strategy of traditional ethics, particular ethical formulations, traditions, and prescriptives that gather under the logics and technologies of coloniality. Indeed, as Badiou puts it, “it might well be that ethical ideology, detached from the religious teachings which at least conferred upon it the fullness of ‘revealed’ identity, is simply the final imperative of a conquering civilization: ‘Become like me and I will respect your difference’” (28).

Inspired by the work of Charles Long, the ethics of opacity establishes the critical principle that those hegemonic knowledge systems unleashed by coloniality/modernity necessarily introduce what Long calls “that ‘thing’ [which] must be suppressed, but the very act of suppression introduces the thing suppressed into the symbolic universe that it stakes out.”²⁰ Long continues with recourse to the work of Paul Ricoeur who writes, “Now defilement enters into the universe of man through speech, or the word; its anguish is communicated through speech . . . the opposition of the pure and the impure is spoken. . . a stain is a stain because it is there, mute; the impure taught in the words that institute the taboo” (204).

Within this nexus, the ethics of opacity suggest a critical site for the production and reproduction of the knowledges of those on the underside of modernity. Long writes,

Black, the colored races, caught up into this net of the imaginary and symbolic consciousness of the West, rendered mute through the words of military, economic, and intellectual power, assimilated as if by osmosis structures of this consciousness of oppression. This is the source of the doubleness of consciousness made famous by W.E.B. Du Bois. But even in these symbolic structures there remained the inexhaustibility of the opaqueness of this symbol for those who constituted the "things" upon which the significations of the West deployed its meanings. (204)

Thus, the ethics of opacity establishes a critical movement, indeed produces an ethical demand, that speaks to and is founded upon a responsibility to interrogate hegemonic epistemological production, which is “the context for the communities of color, the opaque ones of the modern world” (Long 204). Such an ethics calls into question traditional formulations and rehearsal of ethics proper and radically calls into account those “radical” formulations of emancipatory theoretical projects, i.e. scientific Marxism, dogmatic theology, Western democracy, and the host of “post-” prefixed theoretical formulations.

Such an ethics of opacity also entails, or rather prescribes a critical intellectual practice that affirms the worth, value, and dignity of the “human.” Long writes, “Octavio Paz tells us that they were filled with poets, proletarians, colonized peoples, the colored races. ‘All these purgatories and hells lived in a state of clandestine ferment. One day in the twentieth century, the subterranean world blew up. The explosion hasn’t yet ended and its splendor has illumined the agony of the age” (204).²¹ The ethics of opacity is animated by this vision in seeking to articulate the depth of meaning that is announced that these continuing events. In this sense, the ethics of opacity pushes the discourse of ethics to the limit. Accordingly, recourse to Levinas is quite appropriate when he suggests, “My task does not consist in constructing ethics, I only try to seek its meaning.”²²

The ethics of opacity presents “more than an accusation regarding the actions and behavior of the oppressive cultures; it goes to the heart of the issue. It is an accusation regarding the world view, thought structures, theory of knowledge, and so on, of the oppressors. The accusation is not simply of bad acts but, more importantly, of bad faith and bad knowledge.”²³ An ethics of opacity is thus defined by its critical orientation to liberation as articulated by *and* with the opaque ones. It is a critical intellectual posture that disrupts the dominant logic of coloniality/modernity in exploring the

hidden and unknown, the repressed and submerged narratives, histories, and epistemologies – the *sites of opacity* that are the conditions of im/possibility of the contemporary world. Such an ethic is available because, as Long writes, “the strategies of obscuring these peoples and cultures within the taxonomies of the disciplines of anthropology as primitives or the classification of them as sociological pathologies is no longer possible” (211).

The ethics of opacity helps to structure our ability “to effect the deconstruction of the mechanisms by means of which we continue to make opaque to ourselves, attributing the origin of our societies to imaginary beings, whether the ancestors, the gods, God, or evolution, and natural selection, the reality of our own agency with respect to the programming and reprogramming of our desires, our behaviors, our minds, ourselves, the I and the we.”²⁴ Such a move has significant implications for “reimagining our forms of life” and opens up potentially emancipatory possibilities for a critical theory of knowledge in the interests of those on the underside of modernity (204).

In a crucial sense, it is the emergence and existence of the opaque ones that conditions the im/possibility of the project of Enlightenment rationality. Long states, “As stepchildren of Western culture, the oppressed have affirmed and opposed the ideal of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment worlds. But in the midst of this ambiguity, for better or for worse, their experiences were rooted in the absurd meaning of their bodies, and it was for these bodies that they were regarded not only as valuable works but also as the locus of the ideologies that justified their enslavement The totalization of all the great ideals of Western universalization met with the factual symbol of these oppressed ones.”²⁵ The infinite meaning and depth of the “factual symbol of these oppressed ones” is the location of ethics of opacity and in turn structures the relation to epistemology. Indeed, highlighting the relation of ethics and epistemology thus becomes a critical process that cannot be evaded. The disruption produced by the ethics of opacity suggests the primacy of method of procedure as opposed to the fundamental question of ontology for the project of critical theory in the interests of humanity.²⁶

To this end, such an ethical imperative interrupts the imperial/colonial economy of knowledge that privileges a conceptualization of knowledge that conquers through a commitment to clarity of content and transparency of method. The will to clarity and transparency within this theoretical enterprise rests on a fundamental violence that denies difference and negates alternative possibilities of thought as well as of action. The character of this will to know is marked by a process that necessarily seeks to conquer epistemologically and otherwise. Instead, an ethic of opacity develops a critical posture that welcomes the “opaque ones” as fundamental partners in the quest for knowledge. It is a reflexive injunction that reminds us that we always already think in and against particular epistemic traditions and conditions that in/form us. The challenge thus becomes how do we develop a theory of knowledge in critical relation with an ethics of opacity?

IV

The late black feminist scholar and literary critic Barbara Christian stated in her famed 1987 essay “The Race for Theory”: “For people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite

different from the Western form of abstract logic. . . . How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?”²⁷ At the height of the Theory Wars, Christian’s intervention was a timely reminder that a plurality of epistemological positions was open and available when considering African American (re)production of knowledge. Indeed, this crucial observation serves as a prescient warning against an absolutist reading of Gayatri Spivak’s oft repeated claim, “The subaltern cannot appear without the thought of the elite.”²⁸ It is in this spirit that I believe we can (re)turn to the construct of local knowledge as, in the words of Joan Scott, “an epistemological theory that offers a method for analyzing the processes by which meanings are made.”²⁹

By moving to what I will term a constructive conception of local knowledge, I would like to open up for analysis and exploration the intersections between knowledge and culture, theory and experience, and ethics and epistemology. My particular production of local knowledge refers to the linguistic and material structures, devices, and discourses in and through which situated communities theorize, comprehend, and articulate meanings and understandings of their world while simultaneously producing requisite critical apparatuses that interrogate these mental and material constructions and webs of meaning. The qualifier “local” in this context and configuration does not seek to absolutize or (re)inscribe the binary of local – global. Nor does it serve as a placeholder or metaphor for the concept of particular in the now discredited universal – particular binary. Instead, local gestures to, among other things, a critical understanding and awareness of the contingent and qualified foundations of these (and all) knowledge systems without collapsing into a vacuous relativism that rejects any and all possible foundations. This serves as a “reaffirmation of the possibility of (a *postpositivist*) objectivity. In other words, such contingent foundations “replace a simple correspondence theory of truth” with a dialogical “theory of reference.”³⁰

This conception of local knowledge entails a renewed emphasis on mapping the micro-logics of ordinary, everyday practices. Such a move necessitates critical attention to how and in what manner societies and sectors of societies produce and reproduce knowledge systems that overlap with and diverge from cultural systems and technologies. The subtle distinction between knowledge and culture drawn in this framework recognizes the epistemic status of such knowledge systems and advances the perspective of these societies and communities as *epistemic communities*. In this configuration, culture and knowledge are not absolutes isolated within themselves, but are held in dialogical tension whereby the permeable boundaries between them are not simply collapsed. In her book *Interrogating Culture: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory*, Sarah Joseph notes:

In the Western world, questions about the links between knowledge, culture, and power have been raised of late by the social movements like the feminist or black movements In the face of such challenges it is difficult now to maintain that knowledge is independent from culture or power. But not even feminists would wish to deny any specificity to knowledge, and to dissolve it into culture. However defined, the concept of knowledge has always signified some form of truth, and, as such, has provided the grounds for the critical evaluation of cultural traditions and practices.³¹

Thus, the critical task that remains is the close examination and analysis of how knowledge and culture operate together. The constructive conception of local knowledge that I advance seeks to facilitate a deep, nuanced, and thoroughgoing exploration of the “personal experiences, social meanings, and cultural identities,” that make up worlds of meaning and structure the terrain of action. This move towards such a conception echoes the prescient observation by Paula M. L. Moya regarding the epistemological significance and salience of identity:

Who [and how] we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world. Our conceptions of who we are as social beings influence – and in turn are influenced by – our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences in that society are likely to be.³²

In the preface to the twentieth anniversary printing of his influential collection of essays *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, Clifford Geertz suggests the unifying logic for the collection is understood as “the explanatory power of setting *sui generis* phenomena in echoing connection.”³³ Geertz’s assertion in his production of local knowledge critically informs the constructive conception of local knowledge that I am advancing with one notable exception. I seek to highlight the fine lines that set the boundaries between knowledge production and what we may term “*sui generis* phenomena.” I am hoping to capture the complex negotiations between the social construction of the *sui generis* phenomena and its echoing connection as well as the theoretical dimensions that mediate the constructions of such phenomena. Moreover, the theoretical dimension properly encompasses an added dimension of a continual conversation (and contestation) in the process of translation. This dual movement recognizes that “meaning is never fully present because it is constituted by the endless possibilities of what it is not and is therefore at least always partially deferred” and attempts to overcome the limitation in Geertz’s formulation which can lead down a slippery slope where knowledge loses its specificity and autonomy.

Pointing out the epistemological significance of local knowledge while developing critical cartographies of how communities construct dense levels of webs of meaning has potentially significant implications for understanding constructions of the analytics of race, gender, and nation. “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.”³⁴ The specific logics by, through, and on which the discursive and material structures of race, gender, and nation are conceived, mobilized, and deployed requires a cognitive (mis)recognition of these logics. By recourse to an epistemological investigation and interrogation of local knowledge, we can begin to read more critically and carefully how situated communities construct, mobilize, and deploy knowledge systems that navigate and negotiate this terrain. This conceptualization does not pre-empt the understanding that “knowledge, in particular knowledge of and about the social, is produced in a vacuum.” Nor is this a violent abstraction of knowledge from context, for “knowledge producers are set in social milieus.”³⁵ The (re)turn to local

knowledge focuses our attention on a strategic trajectory first announced by Leora Auslander and echoed by Thomas Holt:

The challenge . . . is to simultaneously grasp the manifestations of the very large and abstract structures and transformations of the world in the small details of life; to recapture people's expressions – in all media – of their experiences of those abstractions, while also attempting to understand the forces shaping the multiple grids mediating those expressions; and finally, to analyze how concrete and mundane actions in the everyday may themselves transform the abstract structures of polity and economy.³⁶

In this regard, the problems of conceptualizing the logics of race, gender, and nation move from the level of a “metalanguage” to a level of analysis and interrogation that recognizes the practices, politics, and power of the production and reproduction of these knowledge systems as well as the interrelatedness between other knowledge systems. Moreover, we can begin to engage the micrologics and technologies upon which race, gender, and nation operate and travel and the manner in which situated communities elaborate – from these abstractions – contextualized worlds of meanings.

The conceptual import of this particular production of local knowledge on the analytics of race, gender, and nation facilitates is “a more self-conscious distinguishing between [an] analytic vocabulary and the material we want to analyze.”³⁷ We avoid an uncritical collapsing of knowledge to culture that generally underpins “the widespread assumption that understanding the guiding principles of a culture can [help to] explain and predict the attitudes, responses, and actions of members of a culture.”³⁸ Hence, we can begin to take up Evelyn Higginbotham's challenge to “define the construction and ‘technologies’ of race as well as those of gender and sexuality.”³⁹ Moreover, we can begin to understand the manner in which situated communities adjudicate between competing knowledge systems along such dialogic sites as that of race while simultaneously reinforcing and challenging particular cognitive grids. In turn, we can trace how these epistemic positions serve as an orientating framework for the “empirical organization of human life” as well as a repertory of “representations which mask that organization.”⁴⁰ Finally, with specific reference to articulations of the nation, we can examine the manner in which local knowledge reveals the fractures and cleavages of discourses and practices of the nation. In other words, the knowledge produced by situated communities may reveal the logics of the multi-positionality of the idea and instantiation of the nation.

Grounded in contingency, local knowledge avoids the pitfalls of a “metatheory” as well as reductionist arguments for a fixed method. As Barbara Christian has noted, “Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism because one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity.”⁴¹ Knowledge that authorizes and guarantees such absoluteness of our being human only works to deny that very condition of human *being* in the world. That is, the basic denial of the experiential, the conditioned, the contextual that is and must be a constitutive element

of knowledge. Indeed, because “experience always has [a] divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced – an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there,” the movement for local knowledge foregrounds a theoretical practice that attempts to negotiate critically the complex and contested processes of human existence in the world.⁴²

Furthermore, such a theory of knowledge linked with the ethics of opacity interrupts an economy whereby the deployment of the category “local” automatically reproduces its counterpart “global” and thus, all the power dynamics that ensue from the local/global dyad. Instead the turn to the “local” does not gesture toward this particular economy in that it holds out the very real possibility that radical openness to the prospect of a refusal of translation within a given epistemological framework. That is, the ethic of opacity calls into question the very idea that there is something always present “out there” to which a local referent finds its “logical” counterpart, i.e. global, and asserts that there are distinct limits to the possibility of translating and thus understanding other forms of knowledge. In a very real sense, no global is possible in that knowledge is not always already given within an economy of translation. This ethic structures and privileges a radically new economy of knowledge on the ruins of local/global dichotomy and interrupts previous relations of power and hierarchy bound in such a production. We are thus thrust into a new relation where we are compelled to think anew about epistemology in relation to the question of ethics.⁴³

In risking this conversation on ethics and epistemology, I have sought to gesture toward some of the substantive claims invoked by my particular construction of the ethics of opacity in relation to a particular production of a theory of knowledge. In so doing, my remarks have sought to center a displaced ethical dimension within contemporary theoretical discourse that underscores an indispensable moral theory on the worth, value and dignity of human personality in general, and for people of color in particular. In many ways, the question that opens the title of this essay, taken from W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, serves as an indicator of the material and logical operations of epistemic segregation that is always already embedded in hegemonic knowledge regimes, even those which aspire to be critical.⁴⁴ The theory of local knowledge critically related to an ethics of opacity is a response to this situation and holds out the distinct possibility of playing a crucial role in facilitating what the late Michel Foucault called an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”⁴⁵ Such an insurrection holds the potential of radically pluralizing ideas and conceptions of the rural from the often staid, rarified forms of knowledge that often reign supreme in such the North Atlantic academy. In the face of the contested terrain inscribed in the epigraphs of this paper, such an intellectual practice holds out the possibility of thinking through the “hard knot” – to appropriate C.L.R. James’ apt phrase – of epistemology in the emancipatory interests of humanity. Moreover, we are also presented with the beginnings of a conceptual framework that facilitates a critical reinterrogation of how particular logics of gender, race, and nation can vitally in/form epistemological positions that develop new epistemic horizons. As such, “[t]he multiple discourses of humankind, brought, now, by history into mutual consciousness, are not a Babel but a chorus.”⁴⁶

Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, “[All] tradition[s] can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events Every actualization in understanding can be regarded as a historical potential of what is understood. It is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand in a different way.”⁴⁷ The aim of this essay is not to capture some essential theory of knowledge for utilization in an already configured intellectual and political strategy. It is one possible trajectory in a critical theoretical effort that is always a process of becoming. Indeed, this essay is meant as a contribution to a radically collaborative endeavor where questions are privileged instead of closed, totalizing answers. Partiality is foregrounded and openness is valued in the interests of creating a more humane existence.

Notes

¹ S. Haack as cited in Diederick Raven, “The Enculturation of Logical Practice,” *Configurations* 4.3 (1996): 381.

² Sheldon Wolin, “What Time Is It?” *Theory and Event* 1.1 (1997): 10.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein as cited in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (London: Blackwell, 1992), 1.

⁴ See Carl Boggs, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

⁶ For a critical analysis of the idea of “locating” oneself discursively, see David Simpson, *Situatedness, or Why We Keep Saying Where We’re Coming From* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Andern: ein interview mit Kommentar von Helmut Gumnoir,” as cited in Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology*, 3.

⁹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970) and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: perspectivas* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1970).

¹⁰ On the “geopolitics of knowledge” see Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinex and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985) and Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1995 [1986]), 203.

¹² One example of the new obscurantism in the discourse of globalization is the widely received tome by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). For a cogent critique of this text, see Atilio A. Borón, *Empire and Imperialism: A Critical Reading of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri*, trans. Jessica Casiro (London: Zed Books, 2005).

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), vii. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

¹⁴ See Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 95.

¹⁵ B. Ricardo Brown, “Marx and the Foundations of the Critical Theory of Morality and Ethics,” *Cultural Logic*, 2.2 (Spring, 1999), §3.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze as cited in Brown, “Marx and the Foundations”, §5.

¹⁷ Brown, “Marx and the Foundations”, §4.

¹⁸ Brown, “Marx and the Foundations”, §4.

¹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 24.

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- ²⁰ Charles H. Long, *Significations*, 204.
- ²¹ The original from Octavio Paz reads: “Todos esos purgatorios e infiernos vivieron en ebullición clandestina y en perpetua erupción. Un día, en el siglo XX, el mundo subterráneo estalló. Esa explosión aún no termina y su resplandor ilumina la agonía de la edad moderna.” See Octavio Paz, *Teatro de signos*, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, 1998).
- ²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et Infini* as cited in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 4.
- ²³ Charles H. Long, *Significations*, 208.
- ²⁴ David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 8 (September, 2000), 194.
- ²⁵ Charles H. Long, *Significations*, 211.
- ²⁶ For the work of a critical philosopher who has been working in this area for a number of years, see Lucius Outlaw, *Critical Social Theory in the Interests of Black Folk* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
- ²⁷ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988), 68.
- ²⁸ Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11-12.
- ²⁹ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 9.
- ³⁰ “Postpositivist realists assert both that (1) all observation and knowledge are theory mediated and that (2) a theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable.” Paula M. L. Moya, “Introduction,” Paula M. L. Moya and Michael Roy Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 12.
- ³¹ Sarah Joseph, *Interrogating Culture: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 10.
- ³² Paula M. L. Moya, “Introduction,” in Paula M. L. Moya and Michael Roy Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity*, 12.
- ³³ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xi.
- ³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164.
- ³⁵ David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 149.
- ³⁶ Cited in Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review*, 100.1 (February, 1995), 8.
- ³⁷ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 41.
- ³⁸ Sarah Joseph, *Interrogating Culture*, 8.
- ³⁹ Evelyn Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs: Journal of Women’s Culture and Society*, 17.2 (Winter 1992), 252.
- ⁴⁰ These words are from Henry Lefebvre as cited by Thomas Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review*, 8.
- ⁴¹ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” 281. I do not take this statement as an absolute injunction against all forms of theoretical totalization. To be sure there are conditions obtained in particular marginal and peripheral communities where the need for totalizing theory is acute and necessary. This point has been expertly made by Sylvia Wynter. See David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” 188.
- ⁴² Satya P. Mohanty, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition,” Paula M. L. Moya and Michael Roy Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity*, 29-66. We should also be reminded of the following: “Apart from a few isolated thinkers such as Lucretius, Spinoza, or Nietzsche, as well as Abelard and Occam, the notion of reality plays only the most insignificant role in our philosophical systems and problematics. Reality as such is generally not taken into account. It is called into service only on those occasions when it is a question of refuting fallacious reasoning, of denouncing the frequent misfires of intellectual speculation – and even then, little thought is given defining its status. It is in the name of reality that we triumphantly settle our accounts with error, illusion,

imagination, dream, fantasy, and desire.” Clément Rosset, “Reality and the Untheorizable,” in *The Limits of Theory*, ed. Thomas M. Kavanagh (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 76.

⁴³ The formulation of this position is informed by Jacques Derrida prescient warning against a hypostatized relation of O/otherness: “Of course, in order to respect the entirely other of alterity, alteration itself – which always presupposes a contact, or an intervention, a socio-political, psycho-etc. transformation – alteration itself would have to be impossible. If the other remains at an infinite distance, and this is the condition on which the other is other, not only can the other not touch me, or affect me, but the other cannot even alter anything. . . . There is a moment, I feel, when one must re-start negotiating – this is a political or historical concern. This means that if one restricts oneself to the pure respect for this alterity without alteration, one always runs the risk of lending oneself to immobilism, to conservatism, etc. that is to the obliteration of alterity itself [. . .] There is no reasonable, rational response to this question. There is no logic.” See Jacques Derrida as cited in Stefan Herbrechter, “Preface: Alterities – Politics of In(ter)vention,” *Parallax* 10.4 (2004), 6.

⁴⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford, 1997 [1903]), 37.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 81.

⁴⁶ K. Anthony Appiah, “Inventing an African Practice in Philosophy: Epistemological Issues,” in V. Y. Mudimbe, ed., *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 230.

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 373.

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