

## **A Humanist Ethical Conundrum about Colonial Genealogies: Who's Still Not At the Table?**

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*Abstract:* The positionality of the human subject and the role of place is necessary before analyzing colonialism and the structures of (religious) hegemony. Furthermore, this positioning of the human must include the awareness of the body, movement, rituals, and the use of language. All these elements are situated as part of human experience and not as a separate subject. Colonial subjectivities have touted rationality and the mind/body dualism. If Humanism presupposes a stance that inheres ethics, liberation, and critical inquiry, then the liberatory imaginary must carefully heed Indigenous knowledge and be careful not to appropriate these discursive formations for the interest of colonial domination of Christian conquest.

*Keywords:* colonial, colonialism, humanism, Caribbean, peripheralized knowledge

Human beings, as makers and producers of cultures throughout time and space, have seemed to make meaning about their surroundings, other sentient beings, natural phenomena, and the interactions between other "rational" beings. One of the products of such a desire for order and structure has been the creation of traditions. Though they can be polyvalent based on the particular notion or understanding of the initial creator(s), they can transcend the physical boundaries (nation, religion, etc.). Simultaneously, they can also operate to contain in a static form the traditions as a way of preservation. Furthermore, these traditions express the specific experience of time and space of a specific line of thought. Still, at some point, it might enter into the realm of the symbolic or religious.

The positionality of the human subject and the role of place is necessary before analyzing colonialism and the structures of (religious) hegemony. Furthermore, this positioning of the human must include the awareness of the body, movement, rituals, and the use of language. All these elements are situated as part of human experience and not as a separate subject. Colonial subjectivities have touted rationality and the mind/body dualism. "The settlement of the New World and the development of European empire, Descartes, I think therefore I am marking the moment when Europe rejected a more holistic worldview and embraced the notion that the mind is entirely distinct from the body" (Segal 2013, x). Such a notion was then transmitted to the Christian imagination and utilized as a method for the development of indubitable knowledge of the real world and as an extension of the existence of God to the detriment of other paths to knowledge, truth, or ways of life. I gesture to the Caribbean later in this paper because of my social location.

The worldview that would allow the Europeans to expand their way of life through processes of civilizing the world included the biopolitical tactics to deem who is worthy or unworthy; including renouncing any other form of cultural production that did not make sense or could not be explained through the Christians lens, including Roman Catholicism or Protestantism and its various sects. The fast-paced acceptance of various forms of Christianity in the modern world allowed for a religious subculture and, later on, formed a dominant narrative to permeate in Western Society and beyond.

For example, the notion of morality and ethics has been in its majority influenced by a Christian understanding of what is deemed proper behavior as well as what religious traditions, identities, and philosophies of lifestances are considered to be appropriate. This extends not only individually but also into the social sphere, as well as to the extent of violating the separation of houses of worship and state. As a result, any transgressive religious expressions that aim to center a common sense of values or subscribe to a supernatural worldview are pushed to the periphery. We can see such analysis by looking at the following quote, "the foundation of colonial Christianity rests in its power to monopolize definitions: who is godless, godly, and most godly, all stemming from Christianities definition of the essential nature of God" (Baldrige 1996, 528).

Once the project of colonization was established successfully, through the cultural and linguistic exchange, it began a slow process where the local imagination of its citizens began to change. Carol Wayne White situates the expansiveness of the colonial enterprise across transnational realities and borders. White (2020) contends:

Complex, layered processes of colonization are a part of the history of the Americas, which will inflect the varied usages and connotations of Humanism. With various levels of success, Spain, Portugal, England, and France extended colonizing activities in what would later become the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean Islands. Arriving in the fifteenth century, Europeans began to subjugate and displace the indigenous Americans, who have continued to face successive waves of massacres, violent dispossession, and genocide (2).

As a result, the popular imagination suffers a form of erasure and distancing from the subject. This is important because, to resist acts of isolating or disconnecting histories, there must be an initial decolonization process of the mind which includes examining the language utilized to express and speak against hegemony. Such awareness begins when the hegemonic structures are weakened, and thoughts that subvert the dominant narratives lose their grip on the imagination flow both in the collective and individual subject.

The symbolic and religious began to take shape to express thoughts, ideas, and understand that transgressive "logic" of time—creating in its course a particular worldview that would root the people in ways that made sense even in matters that had to do with the socio-cultural day to day life. The religion then became not only a worldview but a movement, then a denomination, and potentially an institution which would soon after become the gatekeepers of knowledge and the initial idea that sparked its creation. Now, there are social movements made up of individuals, thinkers, scholars, and others who recognize that in the space of the imagination, there can be the possibility for a way of life where the exploration of freethought can be freely explored as it relates to the life of the masses.

Movements have emerged and continue to do so as a reminder of discomfort within the social and cultural within societies. They represent resistance to how the episteme of lived experiences is embodied. For both the secular and sacred to be, they might need to coexist within the same time and space in order to be; after all, they can only be through the imaginary and cultural modes of productions which human beings utilize to define themselves and the world around them. It is in the interplay of creating and constructing these definitions to provide meaning that the embodied epistemes take root in ways that reflect either conformity or resistance to practices within society. A central agent in the colonization of this hemisphere has been the Christian church. In both conquest and colonization, texts and textuality played a significant part. European texts- anthropologies, histories, fiction- captured the non-European subject within European frameworks, which read his or her alterity as terror or lack (Ashcroft et al. 2006). If Humanism presupposes a stance that inheres ethics, liberation, and critical inquiry, then the liberatory imaginary must carefully heed Indigenous knowledge and be careful not to appropriate these discursive formations for the interest of colonial domination of Christian conquest.

### **Popular imaginings, plural possibilities**

The urgent need for the reimagining of not a universal but actually contextual understanding of Humanism from the perspective of the Global South is a must. Mainly due to the need to differentiate the experience of Humanism and as an indirect view humanist who draws their understanding from European frames of references to those who desire a decolonized approach to their life stance. One of the foundations of Humanism, for example, is the aspiration of ethical living, not as a philosophical exercise. But, embodied and practical application that has been observed and critiqued from the North American and European form of doing and understanding Humanism. This is why there are initiatives that have been pointing towards the decolonizing ethics to challenge the subculture of assimilation dominant within Humanist congregational thoughts and practices.

A question of relationality is necessarily a question of ethics. In other words, decolonizing efforts to reclaim an ontological presence, we must broach whose lives are not included in the thrownness of everyday life. I consider how Black lives are rendered invisible or perhaps hypervisible through hegemonic and

normative mechanisms of recognition from Whiteness. As such, we must interrogate the basis of western Humanist ethics. As de la Torre argues, "Eurocentric ethics is not an exercise in establishing justice, but rather a justification for activating power. The Euroamerican ethical discourse becomes a strategy for reconciling some type of moral reasoning with the existing structures [...] without sacrificing the privilege amassed by the prevailing ethics of the dominant culture" (de la Torre 2010, 31). Our ethics, or our everyday actions, through Humanism, must destabilize a reiteration of hegemonic Whiteness.

The invitation and resistance of communities of color towards normative intellectual and philosophical frameworks have been the critique towards a disconnected notion of doing and being a community, which tends to be a highlighted distinction between humanist and atheist spaces. Nonetheless, those spaces have been historically white and centered on the negation of alternative epistemes.

Humanism in North America has been in its most recent history interested in exploring the past as a movement and institution (American Humanist Association and the role of religious trauma). In order to be able to engage in the utilization and implementation of rituals and practices that for some of its members might seem like a reference to theistic worship. But, by doing so, it is a step towards reconciling the static notions of what they are not instead of reimagining and entering into a process of rediscovery which upends hegemonic models.

If there is a contrast between the cultural and religious hegemony in both Christian and humanist communities to bodies that exist, move, and inhabit intersectional spaces as well as lived realities that culturally represent pluralistic frameworks, then could there be a path of reconciling a humanism worldview centered in the experience of those who come from the Global South, for example, those in the Caribbean and if such endeavor is possible what would be some of the foundational sources that would inform and nurture these communities.

The discourses that are happening in the fields like cultural studies could serve as a point of engagement and exploration. What I mean by this is that these fields already recognize the plurality contained not only in the human person but also in the dynamics and daily life of the masses. Unlike other fields of study, the masses or popular culture are not seen as lesser or non-important to the academic community. It is actually the center and root that grounds cultural studies to the source that initiated the processes of curiosity and wondering- the human and their integral relationship with the world in which they exist, including the capacity to create and reinterpret symbols.

Recognizing that human beings are the creators of culture and meaning, then seeking to reclaim the religious as part of the cultural experience means that religious Humanism is not seeking to destroy theism. On the contrary, it seeks to provide a critical lens through which people can explore the process of becoming a seeker of liberation and engage in the responsible journey of liberating oneself from dualistic and binary worldviews that do not allow for a fuller exploration of the human experience. Rivera states (2009):

The use of postcolonial sources demands attention to the specificity of the Caribbean background that I claim and to the distinctive self-understanding of Caribbean peoples in relationship to the African American in the United States because the self-understanding of Caribbean people is distinctively constructed as shaped by their African ancestry, further dialogue between African Americans and Latinas about the body would benefit from closer attention to the differences between racial understanding developed in different areas in Latin America and how they affect racial relationships in the United States including welcome quote forms of crossing of racial and ethnic boundaries" (116).

In a Caribbean context particularly, it means that in the study of the cultural, political, historical, and religious lens, those who hold a humanist lifespance can appreciate and welcome the vast diversity that exists not only in the collective memory but also in the lived realities of societies that have come under processes of colonization. They have been oppressed and impacted to the point of forgetting who they were as a result of the imperialistic practices embedded in the social imaginaries today. As a response, there might be a possibility of a humanism that welcomes and embraces the many worlds, cultures, and (pre-Christian) religious modes that have come forth from the inner world of the peoples like any other response to the quandaries that have been produced to aid and enrich the desire for a flourishing life that in the process can make us more human by impelling us towards others and their well-being.

Without a doubt, Humanism as a subaltern voice can definitely speak and provide the necessary intellectual and communal space for the development of holistic values even to the point to sit with a sense of uncertainty because Humanism is not the sole or maximum expression of human knowledge but an invitation to begin anew in the challenging process of meaning-making not centering the human in isolation instead human in relationship with ecosystems that like them are alive and ever-expanding into what can be defined as communities and not an experience that can in a healthy way be embodied and lived out in isolation as some of the European countries have argued in the past.

### **Humanism redux: Towards a liquid conceptualization**

An influential figure from the Global South who grappled with their "transgressive" and subaltern identities was Arturo Alfonso Schomburg. Schomburg challenged the conventional historical and cultural processes of assimilation by creating what became one of the most important archives for the study of African and African diasporic life. A teacher "is said to have told him that black people had no history, no heroes, no great moments--and because of that remark the young Arturo became fired with ambition to find evidence of his past." (Lewis 2020). Furthermore, we see that his life and intellectual production became transcended. Similarly, there is growing interest in discovering humanism /freethought in other societies and civilizations not only in the realms of aesthetics and philosophy.

Today we see a decentralization of power and more collaboration across individuals, communities, and organizations to create spaces of meaning, legacy, and move away from a position where a few are the oracles of North American humanism/freethought/or nonreligious. The American Humanist Association, located in Washington, D.C., is not only the blue building where the centrality of knowledge production. If Humanism is to live up to its interrogative stance, then its historical legacy must be critically evaluated from various interlocutors and not just through an Western lens.

The intersectionalities among race, class, gender, coloniality, among other axes of human difference, allow us to comprehend the necessity of spaces where liberatory work needs to be done. By this, I mean that Humanism and its ethics must use intersectionality as a heuristic and methodology that informs identity. In the humanist rhetoric, there can be a dismissive approach, where issues of difference are reduced to ontology or simply through the hegemonic regime of Man (Wynter 2003). For example, we see in the "late seventeenth century the institutionalization of racial slavery and how this worldview equated Christian to be white and free or human, moral, and citizen" (Pinn 2013, 100). Such a notion still permeates to some degree within humanist spaces and institutions where the majority of those who hold power and whose voices matter the most embody whiteness. Pinn argues that "European American humanists are accustomed to basing their perception of the world on the "objectivity" of science, and reason while failing to grasp that these indices are themselves shaped by the culturally subjective traditions and histories" (Hutchinson 2020, 29).

Humanism in North America has been known to value and center science, reason, and atheism as its main core. However, Humanism has, in the past few years, begun to recognize the reality of an intergenerational dynamic that recognizes and welcomes culture from its distinct expressions. Despite this burgeoning reality, the rise of a more expanded notion and recognition of being and practicing Humanism as a lifestance is urgently needed. The recognition that truth is in the eye of the beholder and those who hold power either socially or in the room merit the discussion of culture and power in these reframings and dialogues around Humanism(s).

The relationship between Humanism and ethics come together or are embodied within the human person. It is this fluid and symbiotic relationship that challenges the notion that there can be a universal framework either for Humanism or ethics. Through the exploration of intellectual and historical exploration of Humanism and ethics from a decolonial approach. In search for the possibility of speaking to the subaltern and centering non-western notions of freethought in this case (non-white) expressions of humanisms to enter into a process of reclaiming these humanist traditions as part of the global south experience including its socio-cultural dimension and not a monolithic worldview. Furthermore, paying attention to history itself is an important process because, in the same way, that human beings have undergone changes based on the acquisition of knowledge, the same has occurred to both Humanism and ethics.

A close look at some of the historical developments within human history will provide a critical lens to be able to question the utilization of funds of knowledge placed by dominant societies and which have

served to sterilize the epistemes that come from those who embody and experience a different quotidian reality than for example those in Europe countries or North America. An example of social stigma for those who openly identified as a humanist is being looked down upon, which until recently meant that "atheists" were not able to participate in governmental procedures because they would not swear on the Christian sacred texts up to 1961. Questioning then the ethics and morality of citizens who, in other words, resist the Christian dominance metanarratives.

The possibility of political participation within the democratic sphere in the West has been a distinct marker and contribution to both the public and private life. In other words, by creating a divide between the public and private sectors of North American society, the result has been a form of dualistic dissonance that up to this day impacts personal and collective belief, behavior and even defines what is considered ethical. As such, the psycho-social stigma has been the repudiation of self-identification that might connect a person to atheism or non-theism because this would make you an immediate target for dehumanization and, in the words of Frantz Fanon positions an interrogation to those "people below the line of the human who are considered subhuman or non-human" (Fanon 1967; Grosfoguel 2016, 10).

These acts of dispossession experienced by those who have experienced some form of dehumanization in their process of remapping and resisting the colonial mind it is important then to look at location, time, and space not as ultimate and limiting forces but on the contrary as an invitation to reimagine the sense of becoming human. If Humanism seeks to "sell" some form of liberation from oppressive then wouldn't that mean that the human experience as a subject and not an end in itself would allow for a much broader and more pro allistic exploration of what it means to be human in relation to creators of culture, meaning, symbols, icons and so forth that serve in purpose or as a response to some form of curiosity. At the moment that Humanism then becomes the old pressing or limiting structure of which Humanism itself tried to break away from, there must be an initiative to rethink or re- imagine the ways in which Humanism is being ethical without excluding the quotidian.

Dialogue between culture, religion, and governmentality should not be seen as fragmented or divisive but actually as an invitation to begin to see Humanism not necessarily in new ways but from a more cohesive and integrated way and resist the impulse of fragmenting Humanism as solely an scientific or reason focused life-stance but actually building bridges, where spirituality and ethics are recognized and centered in the formation of a humanism that is forming itself as historically invisibilized identities, are re-emerging and adding their brilliance to this unfolding journey. Dr. Pinn also asserts the necessity of a Humanism that not only engages in the philosophical but that aims to address the current states of society in meaningful ways: He writes, "if we truly want to understand the new face and look of Humanism today and why it matters, we must shift our attention to under- interrogated cultural spaces and milieus (Pinn 2013, 78).

Based on Dr. Floyd-Thomas's three phases of Black Humanism, which include Contextual, Contractual, and Constitutive, are tied to the lived experiences of people who claim a humanist identity. I argue appropriating the concept and connotations of liquid to Humanism expounds on Floyd's conceptual framework by allowing for a notion of Humanism that recognizes that in this evolving socio-political climate, we are increasingly occupying liminal spaces and hyphenated identities. To better adapt and respond to individual and collective needs, institutions are carefully thinking about nonlinear and iterative change and creating transformative possibilities. I find this consideration consequential in expanding the capacity to envision a more compelling future. In this conception of liquid informed by Black Humanism, we find that it functions in vastly divergent ways than its white counterpart because it has different obstacles to overcome and different objectives to obtain (Floyd-Thomas 2008, 5). A liquid humanism does not try to hold captive reifications of difference, but rather is an invitation to more capacious engagements of what it means to apprehend how difference is produced and how the relations of difference bear on Humanism. At the same time, this conception of Humanism welcomes processes of visioning where the plurality of the human experience is respectfully tentative yet taken seriously.

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