

Political Worldmaking from Below: An Ethic of Liberation and Freethought

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New worlds, emergent voices, bodies, intellectual diversity, and embodied expressions are becoming more visible within the various humanist, nontheist, and freethought communities in North America as well as internationally. However, most of the resources available have centered on philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics from the white imagination. This forces the commodification of others into these frameworks in order to engage in conversations with and alongside these spaces. However, these practices that have been in place for several decades must be contested in order to liberate and become inclusive of other ways of thinking, being and relating, whether as peoples or institutions, or even within humanistic communities. This rhizomatic paper illuminates the peripheralized subjectivities and perspectives as analytic to articulate an ethic of liberation and freethought. Considerations for instantiating this ethic within community are also provided.

Keywords: ethics, liberation, humanisms, freethought

This is a rhizomatic paper, meaning that I move in and out in transversal ways to theorize an understanding of Humanism from below. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Édouard Glissant emphasize the importance of embracing multiplicity and complexity, and underscore the rhizome/rhizomatic as a way of doing so. The rhizome is a complex network of nodes with multiple entry and exit points, with no fixed beginning or end. Further, it is a rejection of fixed and hierarchical structures, favoring instead a more fluid and dynamic way of thinking about the world. To achieve this orientation in this paper, I look at processes of creating and curating spaces where those in the periphery—namely Black, Indigenous, people of the global majority endemically—have had their imaginations stifled. This paper is informed by the previous works of scholars and practitioners about the role of “Humanism in a Non-Humanist World.”¹

New worlds, emergent voices, intellectual diversity, and embodied expressions are becoming increasingly prevalent within the various humanist, nontheist, and freethought communities in the United States and around the world. The current few institutions, organizations, and spaces that exist are going through processes of disorientation and dissonance that are palpable under the neoliberal capitalist structure. These organizations are envisioning modes of engagement that help to center urgent ethical questions about the character of humanity and matters of relationality and care in a social, political, and material climate that is constantly in flux.²

Not only are Western epistemology and its concomitant cultural productions and gaze being interrogated, they are also being challenged. For example, the interdisciplinary humanities have ushered in important conversations about minority representation and politics to articulate the enduring state of debility that those on the margins are subjected to. These influences have

¹ See particularly, Monica R. Miller, ed., *Humanism in a Non-Humanist World* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017).

² See María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

invariably shaped practices and forms of freethought. For example, dialogues, scholarship, and academic/communal programming are being produced that center, promote, and advance anti-colonial, anti-racist, and liberatory work within nontheist communities from Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and two-spirit people.³ The possibilities to shift the cultural, sensorial, and spatial orientations of Humanist, nontheist, and freethought traditions ultimately upend White, Christian supremacy, and in doing so fundamentally reframe concepts such as culture, religion, theology, spirituality, and belonging.

A multitude of literature and criticism produced by Black, Indigenous, and other people from the global majority offers conceptions of the human experience that are not limited to one particular genre of the human. They often present alternatives—naming philosophies, ethics, and aesthetics that contrast with those originating from white imagination, which can impose processes of commodification and fetishization on the Other.

Those on the margins are exercising greater agency and articulating “otherwise” modes of relating and being. This reparative and reclamatory maneuver reorients (or perhaps, disorients) spaces for conceptual diversity to center peripheralized perspectives—from a sense, not of property, but of communal disposition. It is through galvanizing this power of peripheralized social formation that gives shape to new ways of envisioning, imagining, and practicing community in the nontheist world.

For example, the aesthetic contributions from indigenous ancestral knowledge and cultural productions are reflexively tending to strategies to restore their humanity. As Carlos Renata Carola suggests, in the indigenous context of Abya Yala, the indigenous Kuna name for what settler colonists call the Americas, there “is an ethical attitude acknowledging the various original people’s right to live, to exist, and keep their history.”⁴ This ethical attitude also connects knowledge, the body, and ritual. As short-story author Dawolu Jabari Anderson astutely asserts, “[t]o perform a ritual is to internalize patterns and cycles of celestial bodies that unlock our inner space.”⁵

To illustrate an example from an ethics perspective, I draw from social ethicist, Miguel De la Torre, who frames the importance of providing the tools and resources to contextualize knowledge in ways that are not organized around a dominant episteme, or that of the Regime of Man.⁶ De la Torre expounds, “[i]t is the Euro-American liberal and progressive politicians, clergy, ethicists, and activists that can prove to be the most dangerous, for their fruits may be pleasing to the eye because of their justice rhetoric, but they can be as damaging to the welfare of the oppressed as their neoconservative counterparts.”⁷ This sentiment begs the question: how can

³ Kathryn Post, *Humanist Chaplains Guide Nonreligious Students on Quest for Meaning* (Religion News Service, June 18, 2022). <https://religionnews.com>.

⁴ Carlos Renato Carola, “Precursors of Decolonial Pedagogical Thinking in Latin America and Abya Yala,” in Olga Bernad Caverro and Nuria Llvet-Calvet, *New Pedagogical Challenges in the 21st Century: Contributions of Research in Education* (InTechOpen.com, 2017), 98.

⁵ Dawolu Jabari Anderson, “Sanford and Sun,” in Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 145–66 at 146.

⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2002): 257–337.

⁷ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 41.

the Human begin to question their own sense of identity and their place within history? There is a current tension between cultural and knowledge productions as well as the geographical location that influences our current social realities.

Human beings, like other sentient beings, hold the capacity and growing ability to create rituals utilizing resources and technologies within our environment. However, only humans have the consciousness to perform rituals with an awareness of meaning. These rituals encompass four core elements that provide a foundation to interpret them: people, time, place, and space. Rituals then are an expression of material culture, which is why having a grasp of concepts like culture is important. It is challenging to define something that is not static; but rather, is ever-evolving. This is exemplified in a description of Walter Mignolo's book, *Local Histories/Global Designs* as a discussion of "how the colonial encounter has shaped our understanding of culture and how it is necessary to decolonize our concepts of culture."⁸ In other words, acknowledging and embracing the dynamic and contextual nature of relationality can be a way to honor difference and recognize its important and vital contribution.

Expanding the application of humanisms could offer new possibilities for re-envisioning the field in innovative ways. This may include reframing diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice not as a catch-up movement, but rather as an ongoing commitment that requires structural change beginning in the mind, leading to tangible actions such as policy implementation, and ultimately resulting in societal and cultural transformation. By expanding the scope of humanisms, it may become possible to imagine and create more equitable and just societies that prioritize the needs and experiences of all individuals and communities. In other words, the notions of ethics and aesthetics must be ones that promote the embodiment of a coherence both in ideology and practice. These forms of aesthetics are an "[e]xpression of an ethical subjectivity that defines and positions itself in a way that promotes decolonization and re-imagines human relationships."⁹

Furthermore, humanism, like any philosophical movement or lifstance, has, over the centuries, undergone multiple iterations. By accounting for the polyvalent nature of practice and ritual, it can serve as a roadmap to explore what the next steps could be to co-create histories, philosophies, and aesthetics that reflect an ever changing global yet diverse community.

Howard B. Radest, the dean emeritus of the Humanist Institute, describes the contemporary Humanism Movement as having "its interiority, its tensions, differences, arguments, players, heroes, villains, and so on."¹⁰ This understanding orientates the role of human beings as social animals who have the capacity to grow in self-awareness and cooperativism in order to produce structural and social change. This is an example of how to approach the philosophical and practical through geopolitics in order to address emerging challenges or problems in relationships among individuals, organizations, and society at large.

⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁹ Nelson Maldonado Torres, "Reconciliation as Contested Future: Decolonization as Project or Beyond the Paradigm of War," in I. S. Mclean, ed., *Reconciliation, Nations and Churches in Latin America* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 242.

¹⁰ Howard B. Radest, "Humanism as Experience," in Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *What is Humanism and Why Does it Matter?* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16–41 at 16.

The functionality of introspection and analysis helps in the process of creating a balance that is warranted. In this context, tensions arise from the dominance of a particular group, which can manifest in both ideology and practice. One way to address this tension is to de-center power and recognize the heterogeneity of a diverse tradition, particularly when viewed from a global perspective.

Miller argues that the humanist movement has been dominated by white, male, and middle-class perspectives and has largely ignored the experiences and contributions of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups.¹¹ If there is a struggle that remains and which cannot be fixed or addressed merely by intellectual attainment, merely by joining a particular faith or religious community, merely by living in a particular neighborhood, or merely by acquiring economic wealth, then the struggle and resistance must be faced both in the mind and in the streets. Humanism as a lifeway and organizing force has the possibility to contribute toward social transformation and world-building. That is, the process of constructing and envisioning alternative worlds or ways of being that challenge dominant Western epistemologies and ideologies.¹²

Hybrid Entanglements

Today, there is a heightened awareness of the necessity to challenge historical canons that have defined and limited the various experiences of cultural, intellectual, and philosophical production, which continue to perpetuate the sense of European superiority when it comes to cultural and intellectual sources. Nonetheless, most recently there have been scholars who have taken a stand to demystify such claims and decolonize the mind. Scholar Yomaira Figueroa-Vasquez is inspired by Maria Lugones and her notion of faithful witnessing, a praxis that “challenges singular narratives or dominant perspectives and in doing so takes one away from singular interpretations of truth, knowledge, and rights and toward a polysensical approach: one that understands that there are many worlds, that sees/reads many perspectives, particularly the perspectives of those who are dehumanized or rendered invisible.”¹³

I think about how this praxis of faithful witnessing was taken up by Black freethinkers, where they reclaimed their historiography even in the midst of a religious dominant narrative. By going back to its beginnings in the nineteenth-century, during the second great awakening, the scholar and historian Christopher A. Cameron states that, as Black freethought emerged, it “meant more than the articulation of skepticism or nonbelief. It was instead a way of life and a worldview that influenced political ideologies and social engagement.”¹⁴

As we learn from Black freethought, we notice the integration of the political and the social as an embodiment of the intellectual/philosophical work. Personally, by paying close attention to Black freethought, I identify linkages between the Black freethought movement and

¹¹ Miller, ed., *Humanism in a Non-Humanist World*.

¹² Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities “After Man”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹³ Yomaira C. Figueroa, “Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” in *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 641–56.

¹⁴ Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 4.

my positionality as an Afro-Boricua millennial Humanist/Freethinker in order to contextualize as well as to problematize the absence and lack of representation from one of the fastest-growing global majority-minority in the United States. I suggests that these millennials and generation Z are subscribing to spiritual aesthetics rather than dominant religious discourses.¹⁵

Today, we live in a time of great fluidity where more than ever there is an awareness of how socio-cultural components are intertwined in everything the human being does. This includes social, cultural, governmental, religious, and collective dimensions. The feminist, queer, and Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa coined the concept *nepantla*, where one “liv[es] in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities—psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined.”¹⁶ This idea challenges homogeneity in the realm of identity, that belonging is the only form of expression, and that anything that deviates from this is not authentic. Gloria Anzaldúa expands on the transformative potential of *nepantla*, or

“[t]he place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. Nepantla is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it. Living between cultures results in “seeing” double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent.”¹⁷

These are intimations of a hybrid approach to identity that aids in pluriversal possibilities.¹⁸ Relatedly, Gustavo Benavides defined syncretism as “the emergence and transformation of cultural formations,” and religion as “not only systems containing a cross-boundary but. . . representations based on unions that do not necessarily contain limits or provide boundaries.”¹⁹

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we see how the Indigenous societies met some Criollos and Europeans who represented the dominant power and who came with the intention of using the military, political, cultural, and economic aspects of that power to erase these flourishing societies. Furthermore, multiple colonizing projects took place with the result that the very beings of Indigenous and those in the global south communities and their descendants would carry the sign of trauma in their bodies, psyche, and histories.

The impact of Christian supremacy throughout the Global South was based on a claim that saw any form of cultural expression or practice as the absence of the true God that Christianity understood during that time. For example, Lucumí, which refers to the language

¹⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouse Keating, eds., *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 268.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 548–49.

¹⁸ See also, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁹ Gustavo Benavides, “Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion,” in A. M. Stevens-Arroyo, ed., *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples’ Religions among Latinos* (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1995), 19–46, at 19.

and practices of Santería, is a syncretic religion that originated in Cuba and is based on the religious traditions of the Yoruba people from West Africa. Lucumí, was a transgressive force when colonialism uprooted and then enslaved Black people. Practitioners began to develop complex religious and political systems, mixing Yoruba religion with Christian beliefs in a process of cultural and spiritual hybridization that developed over time.

Through a close study and analyses from a transdisciplinary lens, practices like La Regla de Ocha-Ifá, among others, served as catalysts for resilience, self-determination, and aspirations toward collective liberation. It was in this cosmology that Black slaves found not only an identity but a form of freedom. The Lucumí tradition was one of the places where slaves could take refuge; this fact transformed Lucumí into an equal truth and made it as valid as any other religious experience. In the Yoruba language, Ashe means cosmic energy; this can be translated into other symbols within other religions and can unify both experiences to create new practices and embodiment. The dynamism in the Lucumí tradition can also be found within Catholicism and the way that universal religious symbols can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, always becoming adaptable to any given cultural context.

Religious syncretism developed based on a reinterpretation of context, rituals, rites of passage, and sacred images that allowed the practitioners to maintain their devotion to their ancestral religion and at the same time adopt a new religion within Christianity. Despite the great sacrifice that it took to accept the religion and cultural aspects of the dominant group, this acceptance filled a cultural and social needs of survival.

The challenge that arises is the fluid process of moving from syncretic to cultural hybridity, where there can still be a clash between worldviews. This can be seen, for example, through immigration where dominant groups often see Latiné as immigrants who purportedly come from “cultures of poverty and crime,” and see their culture as a less developed or “unofficial popular” culture; at the same time, some Latiné groups have been integrated into western societies to the point of becoming part of modern capitalist society; as a result, their spirituality and diversity transcend the sphere of subordination and enter one of authenticity and acceptance.

This transition from individual normative practices to collective practices embedded in the everyday experiences of the Latiné community is what allows us to observe the evolution from popular religion to a more organized religious tradition. Throughout this process, both the social sciences and the humanities are helping to redefine and validate communities that have been marginalized by a lack of understanding of how socio-religious structures operate in the lives of the individuals and groups. For Latiné communities to reclaim their identity, and their valid religious expression, we must first recognize and address religious ethnocentrism because, in our societies, it reinforces the oppression and marginalization of religious minorities.

These means of discrimination come from institutionalized religion, the one that is most recognized and discredits any other form of religious expression under the concept of ‘popular culture’ and catalogs them as profane. The institutionalized religions see themselves as the only valid way of religious expression; in the process, they maintain power within their embedded societies. One example of this practice is the creation of elitist norms for religious speech that

condition people to operate in a mentality of prejudice, criticism, and denial of everything that goes beyond the established religious norms.

La Regla de Ocha-Ifá became the cosmology of the oppressed people, but without any interest in proselytizing. That is, the priests did not seek to justify their practices. That is why misleading interpretations have been developed from a Christian lens. The result is a perspective that is different from, or even opposed to, the one held by the practitioners who have the greatest knowledge and understanding of the group's actual beliefs and doctrines. For example, membership within a Western framework was based on the acceptance of doctrinal beliefs or affirmations. In comparison, the Lucumí tradition does not have one homogeneous way of interpretation, which makes the development of dogma more challenging; instead, a deeper value is placed on ritualistic practices. Syncretism has played a transcendent role in the development of societies, as a form of human creativity, within the constant search to find symbols, practices, and beliefs that help to give nuance to individual and collective spirituality. Just as human beings seek sustenance, support, and firmness in a chaotic world this search reflects the great separation between aiming to live fully and merely surviving, especially for those who are colonial subjects.

I suggest the concepts and experiences of *nepantla*, hybridity, the third space, and so on, are ways to develop a greater understanding across communities, ideologies, practices, rituals, and worldviews that do not rely on fixed parameters. It is valuable to develop a relationship with them, either through years of interaction from an objective and non-proselytizing perspective or through learning under a mentor—whether that be a Humanist/Secular Celebrant, Chaplain, Spiritual/Ethical Leader, Rabbi, Shaman, or Babalawo. Such teachers can open the door to worlds where new possibilities of spirituality can be found. Life-giving spaces that support personal growth and development are not limited to trained professionals, representatives of secular organizations, houses of worship, or specific gatherings. Rather, they should be open to everyone who is on a journey of self-discovery and growth. I believe that, just like in traditional initiation rituals or under the guidance of mentors and elders in communal settings, we need individuals who can accompany and guide the current and upcoming generations of Humanists, Freethinkers, and nontheists. They can help these individuals explore new ways of practicing and embodying their life philosophies with energy and enthusiasm. This is an urgent need in our society.

Embodying New Relational Practices in this Era of Flux

During these pandemic times, virtual spaces are being transformed into places where meaning, ethics, aesthetics, community, power, and hierarchy are being re-defined. Commonality and social contracts that once were the norm as one would enter the threshold of brick-and-mortar spaces are being contested and, as a result, new challenges are arising in our contemporary societies once again. British-Ghanaian philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah frames how conflict is not necessarily an oppositional either/or but actually a disagreement between things that might be similar in the eyes of the beholder in terms of what definitions are being agreed upon as issues are being considered. Appiah states “conflict arises most often when two people have identified the same thing as good.”²⁰

²⁰ Kwame. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanisms* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 76.

A world is emerging that pushes the boundaries of what constituted a practice and maybe even a ritual, such as attendance at a space nearby to which membership was expected in some form or another, a community that represented collective memory, legacy, and a future. Platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Facebook groups are serving as mediators in the formation of new aesthetics with the aid of video online platforms, which includes visual arts production and processes of curating on behalf of the listener or viewer from sites like Youtube, Spotify or others. Pinn situates an example of how ritual can be seen from a humanist perspective that speaks to the multiplicity of possibilities “[c]elebration or ritualization involves not this wrestling with the reconstruction of lifeworlds, but instead, it demands organizing moments of reflection meant to revitalize and renew the humanist (individually or within the context of community) to provide the wherewithal necessary for ethical practices.²¹

Crossing borders, expanding potentially different ethnic, cultural, and value systems has become more accessible and proximate through the use of technological advances. Presenting yet again an evolution for how we live, engage, and relate with one another. Though issues of race, class, gender, and age have not disappeared in these spaces, it has provided an equalizing opportunity for communities of color to be able to assemble, work across geographical divides, and re-imagine a world that becomes more human in the process.

Praxis

The creation and curation of community has been co-opted as a way to keep people's imaginations, lives, and futures captive. What I mean by this is that the notion of community should not be interpreted or seen as romanticizing labor. Community is a commitment to the individuals as well as the collective, in short and long-term, where there is mutual accompaniment through the unfoldings of life. It is a space that fosters exploration, contemplation, and a critical fabulation where people are empowered to heal, free their minds, and reclaim their humanity.²²

Community can also be a space where tensions arise as people are in various stages of being, becoming, and growth. Some might desire productivity, qualitative measures in order to consider the viability of a space. While others might be concerned with the interior life, the arts, creativity, and freedom-making or any other permutation thereof I argue that “brave spaces”—or intentional spaces that encourage mutual dialogue, respect, perceptivity, and strategic risk-taking—are a more generative analytic to avoid superficial engagements when confronting difficult knowledge.

By creating brave spaces, individuals can engage in meaningful and productive conversations that challenge their assumptions and expand their understanding of complex issues. This approach encourages vulnerability and openness, allowing for more authentic interactions that promote deeper learning and growth. For example, when tensions arise within community spaces, such as when reflecting upon the reasons why a space is being built and

²¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

²² Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in two acts” in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

sustained—this is a moment for discerning intentions collectively. Furthermore, questioning whose voices are being centered and heard as carrying the most weight, the ideas or prompts that call us to mobilize, all this should be weighted by the project of freedom. Being in community is a daily decision and an act to resist isolation and move us towards minimizing isolation, which has exponentially impacted human life more than ever in our history.

An ethic of liberation and freethought can utilize the diversity of wisdom and knowledge that individuals hold, such as indigenous cosmologies and the skepticism provided by science and reason. By doing so, it can create a brave space that embraces a pluriversal politic. Recognizing that the human experience and journey encompasses multiple worlds, ideas, and embodied modes of knowledge, there is a need to explore and discover more in life. As a community, we can engage with these diverse genres of being human and different ways of living life. This can involve actively seeking out and valuing diverse perspectives, engaging in open dialogue and critical thinking, and sustaining spaces that encourage growth and life-long learning. Through these efforts in meaningful community, how might we engage these different genres of being Human, of doing life?

Conclusion

Life threads together different world systems and the lived experiences of peoples, their histories, cultures, identities, philosophical/religious/spiritual ideologies, and ethical hermeneutics. Allowing the various ways in which traditions uncover what has been foreclosed through dominant narratives may revitalize existing and emerging communities of practice and meaning-making. This orientation to becoming more alive and experiencing life in this way frees the individual and collective imagination, the relationship with institutions, and the ways in which liberative practices can be embodied. The first step is to continue and explore in conversation and practice the various ways in which we conceive freethought, ethics, aesthetics, and relationality in everyday life or in worlds in the making.



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