

# The Time of History, the Times of Gods, and the *Damnés de la terre*

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The drama between religion and secularism is as old as European modernity itself, or perhaps older. The biographies that are found in this dossier are a testimony to the endurance of this tension. Here the tension does not take the form of a contrast between the Church and the State, but between the faith and religious traditions of intellectuals and the demands of their academic work. Two of the authors, Dr. Berger and Dr. McClintock Fulkerson, teach in a Divinity School at a large secular university. Their concerns echo a double movement of critique or sets of tensions: on the one hand, one finds an expression of the struggle of theologians in increasingly secular contexts, and on the other, there is a recognition of the power of (secular) critique (along that of theological critique) which in some ways expresses their own critical posture as women toward a male theological establishment. They are theologians who strongly believe in the critical power of theological discourse, but who nonetheless realize the need of dialogue and contact with their secular confrères. At the same time, they are critical of secular absolutism and of the dismissal of faith or tradition-informed perspectives in scholarship.

While Drs. Berger and McClintock Fulkerson attempt to save theology from its “academic despisers” and make it more open towards the secular grammar of critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion, their interlocutors experience the tension between religious faith and the academy in different ways. Since their degrees are in the humanities and the social sciences, their work is evaluated in the strict terms of the secular university. As full members of the secular university, they live in an environment which, unlike the Divinity School, is antipathetic to the expression of religious creeds, spirituality, or faith (sometimes particularly so if it is Christian). Dr. Hart teaches in a Religious Studies Department, where “religion” and “religions” are considered to be objects of study rather than an inspirational or doctrinal source. The debate between the secular academy and theology is often stronger in contexts where one finds Divinity Schools and Departments of Religion together, since they often have quite different claims or approaches toward the same objects of study. Sometimes this divide plays itself out in terms of the encounter between dispassionate analysis and critique on the one hand and faithfulness and inspiration on the other. Yet, as much as they are opposed to each other in certain respects, both Departments of Religion and Divinity Schools tend to be heavily Christian-centered in focus. Christianofilia in Departments of Religious Studies results from the historical relation between Divinity Schools and Religious Studies as well as from their conceptual ties. For Religious Studies often served as a way for committed Christians who would have otherwise taught in a Divinity School, to teach religious values and history to young college minds.<sup>1</sup> The conceptual ties are obvious since the legitimate theories of religion and secular theories at large were devised with Christianity as the privileged model or anti-model, which resulted in intimate connections between them.

While Drs. Berger, McClintock Fulkerson, and Hart work in disciplines closely tied with Christianity in major respects, Drs. Ansano and Rudy work in disciplines which bear the mark of the secular university even more strongly. They are Anthropology and Women’s Studies respectively. Anthropology emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It focused on the study of non-Western peoples. Anthropology is a site where similar concerns to those found in Religious Studies emerge frequently. One key question in both is the relation between the participant and the observer, which sometimes

takes peculiar forms when the observer herself is also a participant. Women's Studies is a recent field. Unlike anthropology, it did not emerge out of the need of an imperial culture to know its "Others," but out of the struggle of some of the internal "Others" for justice and representation. In some ways, Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies's related fields occupy a "third world" within the academy. That is, although they tend to work with the protocols of the secular university, they struggle mutually against predominantly white and male secular and theological traditions. This position is reflected in Dr. Rudy's narrative, who critically engages both secular knowledge and theology.

Dr. Thorne is a historian. History is older than Christianity itself, and became a fundamental part of the secular humanities. History can also be used as a weapon of critique against those who believe in the intervention of non-human agency in human affairs. Dr. Thorne turned from intense religious faith to the critique of religion, using history as her weapon of choice. Her disenchantment with the secular critical academy led her back to Christianity. She struggles now to reconcile her faith with the secular methods of research. All of the writers share a similar situation, they were raised in religious contexts (sometimes, as one of them puts it, "breathing religion"), and later on encountered the idiom of secular critique, which impacted them in different ways. It is notable, although perhaps not surprising, that Drs. Berger, McClintock Fulkerson, and Hart, who now work in Divinity School and a Religious Studies Department, seem to be the ones who stayed in the course of their faith more invariably—even though they may feel to some extent out of tune with their respective traditions, as is the case with Dr. Hart. The others developed more critical attitudes toward their religion or culture and found a refuge of sorts in the academy, only to realize later that such a refuge represented another prison of sorts. They all find themselves now living in different ways the tension between deep "religious" feelings or commitments to a faith or spiritual tradition, and the world that they inhabit in the academy. It is out of this tension that they write their own biographies, which introduce us into the personal drama which underlies the desire to build *worlds and knowledges otherwise*.

Their common concern with the reconciliation of faith, the secular academy, and the languages of critique led the authors to look for answers in the writings of progressive scholars who reflect on religious themes. Some of them, like the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, proved to be anathema, as Dr. Hart's unforgiving critique of Žižek's views on religion and their subsequent exchange proves.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Stuart Hall and Franz Hinkelammert, were more useful, or at least less problematic. But it was Dipesh Chakrabarty's reflection on subaltern history and religion that attracted them the most. Chakrabarty spoke to them in several ways. Chakrabarty is a historian who uses a Marxist approach to tell the story of subaltern people in India. In his piece "The Time of History and the Times of Gods" he reflects on the limits of secular translations of subaltern acts, which often presuppose for them a religious framework.<sup>3</sup> Chakrabarty points out not only the incommensurability of views between the secular historian and the religious subaltern but also the vertical hierarchical relation between them. Only secular discourse can claim universal currency. Secular discourse is conceived to be a universal translator, a discourse that can digest everything. What it cannot digest or even detect is indigestible only because it has no importance. Secular discourse is all-knowing and impenetrable. Chakrabarty vacillates between condemning translation for its limits and incompleteness (due to incommensurability), and identifying a subalternizing dynamic between the language of the secular historian and religious conceptions of time (due, one could say, to the marginalization or colonization of the time of the Gods). For most of our writers, Chakrabarty appeared as the ideal secular intellectual: one who is humbled by the world of faith. Chakrabarty animated the theologians to reach him from the other side, that is from the side of religious faith. He also gave hope to the secular scholars that their methodologies do not have to be

understood in frontal opposition to the world of faith. Dr. Hart is perhaps the exception here, since he dissolves Chakrabarty's dilemma by translating his problems in terms of the difference between interpretation and explanation. I will come back to this later.

An important element of Chakrabarty's narrative is that for him not only have the subalterns been subalternized, but also their Gods. From that, Dr. Hart frames his analysis of Chakrabarty's claim under the fashionable title "Can the Subaltern Gods Speak?" The phrasing is important. Dr. Hart does not refer to the subaltern's Gods, but to subaltern Gods. Divinity in modernity has turned into a symbol of subalternization. In the university, the Holy Trinity appears to represent more a caste of sorts than a legitimate citizen of the academy, and even less an omniscient being. Thus, by virtue of their association with the Divine "race" our authors also face a kind of subalternization. The question, of course, is: what kind of subalternization is this, and can it be compared with the subalternization of the subaltern subjects whom Chakrabarty was primarily investigating. Or is it, that, similar to Dante's inferno, there are different floors in hell. If so, it is necessary to understand them as well as any routes of escape.<sup>4</sup>

Our authors tend to identify themselves quite directly with Chakrabarty's subalterns. Dr. Rudy makes it explicit: "Like the subaltern 'savages' encountered by Dipesh Chakrabarty, we are coerced by language to rob our gods and spirits of agency." Dr. Rudy makes other illuminating comments about the group. Referring to the problematic ways of relating, or failing to relate, secular and religious discourse, Dr. Rudy states: "Our group believes that there may be another venue, one that ties spirituality to newly emerging discourses of subjectivity theory. Post-structuralism, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, performativity studies, queer theory all seem like viable instruments to help us articulate the agency that other-worldly being have had in our lives." These two statements are revealing. For they point to the tendency (perhaps even desire or temptation) of identification with the subaltern, but also to the limits of such characterization. On the one hand, the subaltern that Chakrabarty has in mind would be hardly able to have access to the most recent and fashionable discourses in the academy in order to articulate their concerns. And when they do, their discourse often poses unique challenges not only to theology but to mainstream secular discourses on subjectivity as well. On the other, our authors, who are "coerced by language to rob our gods and spirits of agency," would never, I think, be refereed to as "savages"—as uncritical and lacking objectivity yes, but not as "savages"—at least by virtue of their faith alone. Clearly not all subjects are equally subalternized, and certainly not their gods either.

A crucial question that becomes important to us here is whether Chakrabarty is asking if the "subaltern Gods can speak" or if the "Gods can speak at all" whether subaltern or not. I think that Dr. Hart's phrasing of the question (in terms of the first alternative) is accurate, but at the same time I think that our authors have more the other alternative in mind when they write. Historically, secular thought had Christian theology as its main contender for influence and is thus particularly resistant to its presence in the secular academic world. Divinity Schools may be physically close to secular universities, but they tend to be worlds apart. One of our theologians notes with irony what has become a truism for the last couple of decades: that while fields like cultural studies are opening "to the worlds of spirits, magic, and religious practices," the Christian tradition and its theology tend to be for them anathema (See Berger). One question is, of course, whether cultural studies opens in any significant way to the "worlds of spirits, magic, and religious practices" that Prof. Berger talks about. Dr. Ansano's narrative indicates that this might not be the case. In fact, I have the impression that, even in their resistance, at the end, the secular academy would be more tolerant and respectful toward any Christian theologian than toward an energy healer. While the Christian theologian could be perceived as dogmatic and regressive, the energy healer cannot disassociate himself or herself completely from the demonic, particularly if he or she is a person of color. One

cannot forget that as much as Christianity has been subalternized by secularism, historically it has also served as a means to “elevate” people from their racial status. Indeed, the subalternization of Christianity was facilitated by its association with the non-Western racialized world. One only has to recall that when Immanuel Kant refers to people bounded by religion and tradition as “minors” and the Enlightened as adults, he was drawing on a history in which European whites (including Christians) were conceived as “adults” and people in the colonies as “minors,” with some of them, particularly blacks and indigenous peoples, as irremediably childish or entirely non-human.<sup>5</sup>

### **Inter-mission: The Expansion of Critique or the Return of Orthodoxy**

Christian apologetics has taken a very interesting turn in our so-called postmodern world. The conditions of life in post-industrial societies along with the increase in consumerism and the deconstruction of the narratives of modernity have led to fundamentalist reactions on the one hand, and to the return of religion in the academy on the other. The deconstruction of modernity involves a critique of its many “prejudices,” which include anti-Christian and anti-religious bias. And thus, with modern notions of normative criteria abandoned or highly criticized, there is no firm basis to keep religion at bay in modern societies or in the post-modern academy. A variation of this move consists in embracing Christianity and European philosophy and values in face of the loss of normative standards, which leads to new forms of orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> In a very ironic move, Christian theologians such as George Marsden now cite the existence of non-traditional fields such as ethnic studies and women’s studies in the academy in order to reveal what for them is an utter lack of consistency when it comes to recognizing the legitimacy of a Christian viewpoint in the secular academy.<sup>7</sup> The argument is that if allegedly ideologically loaded programs such as ethnic studies and women’s studies (and Marxism is also included here) have a place in the academy, then Christian views must also have a place. For Marsden, these programs examine reality through angles that are not shared by everybody and are prejudiced in favor of certain perspectives and critical of others. Is this a fair argument, or a gross misrepresentation of these fields?

I think Marsden does not understand the difference in the epistemological basis of the knowledges produced from positions of social subalternity from the views articulated from faith. He all too easily conflates “colonial difference” with theological difference.<sup>8</sup> Colonial difference as well as the knowledges that are produced from subalternized positions challenge both Christian theology and Western secular humanism on their own terms, that is, on terms of their claims to further either the “salvation” or “civilization” of humankind. The existence of ethnic studies, women’s studies, and Marxism in the academy, fields with some influence but still very marginal, claim a space in the secular academy because they have shown contradictions in secular humanism and have given voice to those whom secular humanism allegedly represents but in reality tends to elide. They criticize theology for similar reasons. By equalizing theology with them, Marsden obscures the epistemological status of these disciplines or perspectives and reduces the impact that they have for his own discourse. Marsden thus returns us to the happy days (for a Christian) where the decisive drama occurs between secular humanism and Christian theology.

My question here is whether some or most of the authors in this dossier are complicit with this gesture? I would like to know how their concerns and their reflections are different from radical orthodoxies that combine Christianity with social criticism on the one hand, and with perspectives such as that of Marsden on the other. The question is justified by explicit comments from the authors’ themselves. Dr. Rudy’s confession is telling: “We all know that our crafty phrase ‘faith-based knowledge’ doesn’t necessarily signal the faith of Christian tradition; the thing is, though, *we want it to.*” I believe though that while our authors sometimes approach the views of radical

orthodoxy and other conservative scholars all too closely, they represent a different and more progressive response to the challenges encountered by religion in the academy today. This is due not only to their healthy critical and dialogical attitude that is reflected in their openness toward each other, but also to the strong presence of issues like race (predominantly) and sexuality (to some extent) in their narratives. The biographies that we have here serve as *witnesses* of the profound connection between religion and scholarship in the lives of many and of the pervasive and continuous presence of race in the post-industrial (for some) and allegedly post-modern world.

### Decolonizing the Spirits

The *witnessing* of racial oppression is very clear in our authors' narratives. The authors encounter race very openly in the places where they were born or where they traveled. Dr. McClintock Fulkerson -- "a nice southern *white* girl," as she introduces herself -- evokes memories that reveal how race works in certain spaces:

That Marianna was only thirty-four miles from Elaine, Arkansas, site of the infamous 1919 race riot and massacre, was not something I knew about growing up. I only knew that Marianna was a wonderful place to visit, where we children were treated as very special. I remember passing the occasional mule pulling a wagon when I visited my grandparents as a child...and black people picking cotton in fields as we drove along U.S. highway #1 to the big city of Memphis to do our shopping. Years later my cousin Griffin, who grew up in Marianna, became a poverty lawyer and wrote letters to the Marianna Gazette criticizing the racism of his hometown.

Dr. McClintock Fulkerson also notes that "The noon meal in families like my grandparents was served on china by an African American maid in uniform." It is very interesting that her grandparents at some point tutored African American children while they had "reacted to Brown vs. Board of Education with dismay.... The answer was that 'the haves' were supposed to help the 'have-nots.' You feel guilty if you don't—especially after Civil Rights legislation. 'It's the Christian thing to do'...". Yet the Christian thing to do, as McClintock Fulkerson herself suggests, was understood in terms of individual action and not in terms of systemic transformation or creation.

Throughout the other texts race also appears as of fundamental importance. Dr. Thorne writes that "faith was the lens I learned to see the world through, as much if not more than my race, class, or gender." Yet, referring to the town where she was raised Thorne also states that "race trumped everything else in this ugly little world's measure of respectability.... The faith that is my family heritage is covered in blood, and I'm not talking about the blood of Christ. Or am I? It is a faith that succored the perpetrators of Klan terrorism...". She also notes that she thinks that her "flight from faith began on the Sunday my supposedly 'liberal' North Raleigh congregation stiffened in dumbfounded disapproval at Willie's entrance." Willie was her black boyfriend from school. As if it not were enough to indicate the centrality of race in her life and narrative, Dr. Thorne declares that witnessing an intra-racial dispute at her parent's church when she was already in college, "would have a formative influence on my understanding of how 'race' (by which I mean white racism) works on the subject of my dissertation and eventual book." Race and her position towards it cross directly through Dr. Thorne's identity, faith, and intellectual vision.

In the narratives of our other authors race appears very strongly as well. Dr. Hart, who describes himself as one of the "angry children of Malcolm X," joined the Black Panthers in 1973. At some point in his youth he refused getting branded on his chest or arm with the Greek letter of the fraternity that he joined because "On my view, we (black people) had fought too long against the

prison of white supremacy to willingly incarcerate ourselves in black prisons.” While Drs. McClintock Fulkerson, Thorne, and Hart offer examples of the dynamics of race in their U.S. American towns, Dr. Berger takes us all the way to Germany. She was born there only ten years after the end of the Second World War. About her childhood she states that she “knew that there were ‘others’ around me. Besides the every-present Protestants, ‘the Jews’ were ominously present in their overwhelming absence.... In the 1960’s, Turkish Muslims were beginning to come as *Gastarbeiter*, ‘guest workers.’ But the geography of my childhood was safely Catholic.” This safe world will soon come to be more critically addressed after her move to the United States.

The change in geopolitics [her move to the United States, to a place close to Prof. Thorne’s North Raleigh area] enabled me to see a particular cultural given that I had so far hardly paid attention to, gender, especially my own. I began to realize how pervasively gender shapes all cultural formations, including practices of faith. This realization, however, grew indirectly, namely by confronting the way race functions. Not that I, as a German, needed to be reminded of the deadly power of racializing.....

Dr. Berger notes that she was startled when she was asked for her “race” in a U.S. form. “I was stunned; I had no idea what was being asked. I hoped that no one was interested in whether I was a ‘Jew’ or an ‘Aryan.’” Perhaps, Dr. Berger was not so wrong after all. Frantz Fanon and others have commented on the links between all kinds of racisms, including anti-semitism and anti-black racism. Dr. Berger did not find any racial category with which she could identify. “When a friend informed me that I was to check ‘Caucasian,’ I laughed in disbelief. What did I have to do with a mountain range in the then Soviet Union?” What was most telling in her new context, however, was “the division of labor in terms of gender and race. The housekeeping staff was entirely African-American and overwhelmingly female. The faculty of the Divinity School, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly white and *exclusively* male. There was not a single women with a Ph.D. who taught at Duke Divinity School at that point in time.” And, of course, the one to be hired was seen as “Caucasian” and additionally invested with the credentials of white Europeanity.

Race in the other authors’ narratives appears less conspicuously, but still quite clearly. Dr. Ansano was born and raised in predominantly black Curaçao, an “island-colony of the Netherlands.” Yet, race is not a predominant theme for him. I have the suspicion that Dr. Ansano does not focus on race too much in part because he does not want to suggest that stories such as Almasola can be explained away through some critical analysis that focuses on race and colonization. In this, Ansano’s narrative is connected with McClintock Fulkerson’s theoretical paper, which takes as its central issue avoiding a reduction of her faith to her racial formation and consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Yet at the same time, just like McClintock Fulkerson, it is clear that Dr. Ansano cannot avoid referring to questions of race in his spiritual autobiography. Indeed, given the geopolitical location where he was raised, one could speculate that if race is not so prominently in this narrative it may simply be because it was absolutely everywhere, so patent that it disguised itself as normal. This is suggested when he writes that after reading in college “the three Fs: Fanon, Freire, and Fromm,” he became incredibly angry for a while, and really cried hard after reading *Black Skin, White Masks, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, The Wretched of the Earth*.... I knew then that both clarity and life had been stolen from me before.” And Fanon, of course, made the point about the inherent connection between racism and colonialism. Our last author is Dr. Rudy, who does not introduce race into her narrative too much, but who nonetheless makes clear that in her search for a spiritual refuge or church after her experience in Catholicism and the women spirituality movement of the 1980’s, there were several

criteria or “filters” to select her new spiritual home. After the idea that she would only join what she considered a Christian church, that it “had to be white” was one of the most important criteria for affiliation. She adds that it also had to be “close to home,” but clarifies this with “which pretty much meant white.”

There is another important but indirect way in which race appears, or rather does not appear, in Dr. Rudy’s narrative. Dr. Rudy cites Gloria Anzaldúa’s “La Facultad” which Anzaldúa herself defines as “the capacity to see in surface phenomenon the meaning of deeper realities.”<sup>10</sup> I am noting that the reference to race is indirect here because Anzaldúa’s entire description and analysis are predicated on her life in the borderlands, which include racial divides or Du Bois’s “color line” as a constitutive part. Her purpose is to recreate the borderlands, to learn from her experience and the experience of others in such a violent territory, and to shift its dynamics so as to embrace multiplicity and to make it part of a decolonial praxis and way of thinking. One of the ways in which this “shift” is supposed to take place is by the opening of the self to images, ideas, feelings and convictions that allow for the recognition of spirits in her life. And Rudy correctly notes the absolute relevance of “la facultad” to spirituality, even though the connection to race is not made obvious.

The centrality of spirituality in Anzaldúa’s work is often missed by her commentators, and she herself has complained about such dismissal.<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* powerfully illustrates the difficult position of the “subaltern” or, better *damné*, and the painful process of emergence as a subject with a voice in a secular and racist context. But her radical politics cannot necessarily be subsumed into Marxist categories, even when such categories are deconstructed. And the insistence on agency as well as on the centrality of race and spirituality in her narrative make her claims difficult to equate with poststructuralist theories in vogue, as important and insightful as some of them are. Anzaldúa’s views can be related to such theories, but hardly equated with them, as Norma Alarcón and Chela Sandoval have so eloquently shown.<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa put it succinctly when she wrote “I know things older than Freud.”

One could say that Anzaldúa occupies the position of Chakrabarty’s subaltern, with the difference that she, paradoxically, became a subject of discourse and not simply an object for the historian. Anzaldúa is the “subaltern,” or better *damné*, getting a voice, initiating (rather than simply imitating) a discourse, and speaking back with demands for transformation. To the question of whether the subaltern can speak, one of the possible answers that emanates from Anzaldúa’s work is, “well, yes, with the help of the spirits, or in virtue of the spiritual dimension of existence...” One wonders why our authors did not take more of these kind of readings seriously. It is not that Anzaldúa would have necessarily provided a response to the complex questions that they have, but her text could have brought to light different aspects of the questions. One interesting characteristic of Anzaldúa’s work is that while her claims may not be understood at first, she becomes a translator of the images that invade her and the feelings that grow in her to the point that understanding is made possible. While most of us (academics) tend to take scholarship and writing for granted, we cannot forget that the moment of writing (or other creations through which the subject theorizes her situation and understands herself) indicates no less than a metaphysical event in the non-dialectics of damnation. There is a going out of itself, a qualitative and paradoxical stepping forward here that is hardly dialectical. Lewis Gordon’s description of the relevance of writing for Caliban apply also to writings such as Anzaldúa (also a Calibanesque figure):

Yet, like Caliban, modern Africana thinkers’ use of Prospero’s language is infused with forces of magic: They represent disruptions and rupture. We could imagine an alternative reading of Caliban as a being who had his mother’s knowledge, which he

could fuse with Prospero's knowledge. This could offer what James has characterized as "creative universality," that which, because it always raises *possibility*, constitutes freedom. Writing is one among many activities with creative universal potential, and it is the theorist's work not only to articulate this in the body of literature left behind by prior theorists, but also to draw out creative dimensions for subsequent generations, the effect of which, in each stage, is the complex symbiosis of epistemological, historical, and ontological possibilities. As Sylvia Wynter, echoing other Africana and other Caliban theorists who have preceded her, has articulated this project..., it's the liberation writer's effort to contribute to the construction of new forms of life.<sup>13</sup>

When the racialized subject writes and questions the premises of what is considered to be the "normal" world, she is hardly understood. Her problem is not only theological or religious, even though theology and religion may be part of her narrative. There is simply a difference between the "normal" way of looking at the world (a normality which presupposes the questioning of the humanity of some subjects) and the perspective of someone who defies such normality. When the *damnés* write their claims, they can hardly be understood by the "normal" world or translated into its way of understanding, quite simply because they demand *another* world and the emergence of different forms of life. Their writing is a means of creating them. Such writing poses the challenge of decolonization as an intrinsic part of any process of translation. Put differently, decolonization takes precedence or orients the task of translation.

We should avoid confusing decolonization with deconstruction. It should be obvious that deconstruction does not necessarily entail decolonization. There is a way in which the same Eurocentric habits are reintroduced again, but under the aegis of the privileged deconstructor. This is not to say that deconstruction cannot be useful to advance decolonization. It is important to make alliances that involve mutual transformations, which by necessity expand the field of theory. But the deconstruction of areas of scholarship like Marxism by themselves do not necessarily entail their radical transformation. Deconstruction has to be connected with decolonization projects for it to foment further change. Anzaldúa's work is most relevant in this context because she challenges "hegemonic" discourses, secular and theological, by introducing the peculiar character of damnation and non-Christian spirituality simultaneously. Dr. Ansano's narrative introduces some of this, but his account of damnation is much less central in his autobiography than to Anzaldúa's account of her lived experience in the borderlands.

What I am suggesting here is that the existential drama of the *condemned* raises peculiar challenges for theory and requires the creation of new ideas to clarify its situation and possibilities for transformation. In so far as the *damnés* have "no ontological resistance" in the eyes of the white, as Fanon put it, their existential modalities, including their experience of time, take unusual shapes.<sup>14</sup> The time of *damnation* is, unlike historical materialism's view of history, non-dialectical. Neither the different shapes of Spirit, nor those of material reality and production fundamentally change the fate of such subjects. The *damnés* live in a veritable hell. And it is from hell that they invoke their gods, when they have any. But theological questions also take unique shapes in such a world. For those who engage Christianity, for instance, the question of theodicy turns into an enquiry of how God can be all powerful and merciful when she or he allows *hell* to exist.<sup>15</sup> Salvation in this context becomes a struggle for liberation which requires no less than a radical confrontation. The *damnés* question the figure of God as it appears in the symbolic order (religious and secular) that begets and sustains damnation, that promotes indifference and violence, and that leads the condemned to mask



herself in order to appear as human (*Black Skin, White Masks*). The time of the *damnés* cannot be fully understood in terms of the time of the nation or the time of the productive forces of capital. Are there *traces* that allow for that time to be thought or at least recognized in the Marxist narrative? Perhaps there are, and they should be identified. But the encounter with the *damnés* should not only motivate the search for traces in master narratives, but also a more systematic process of critique opened to dialogical encounter with a subject who not only suffers or is oppressed, but who also thinks and *writes*—and whose knowledge is not dependent on revelation or the authority of a text, even when heavenly gods may visit hell. Thus we have to move from the location of *traces* to a more consistent decolonization that involves an opening of the terms of debate to include not only the time of history and the times of the gods, but also, the time or peculiar temporality of the *damnés*.

While Chakrabarty's essay does not seem to go beyond an appreciation of the idea of *trace* as a corrective to the limits of secular translation, Dr. McClintock Fulkerson makes clear that both Chakrabarty and she herself wish to move beyond. And it is in this recognition of the need to move *beyond* that her views collide more strongly with those of her colleague, Dr. Hart. Dr. McClintock Fulkerson makes the contrast explicit:

Chakrabarty's category requires not only that the "outsider's" categorial worlds have purchase on the world of the believer, but also that the outsider allow her categories to be potentially altered by the world view of this other that is the person of faith. (I don't see where Bill's explanatory categories have room for this).

It may be true that Dr. Hart's (Bill) account of the difficulties of translation in terms of the distinction between description and explanation don't seem to leave much room to an effective alteration of the secular grammars of explanation by the "person of faith," yet the "person of faith" as such is not the *condemned*, even while one often finds gods in hell. It is first and foremost in respect to the *condemned* that I will make the call for the transgression of secular grammars insofar as the time of history cannot account for the temporality of *damnation*. My point is simply that damnation raises unique perspectives and questions that are relevant for any discussion about religion and secularism that need to be considered carefully. It also raises important questions about translation.

What I want to suggest here is that the discussion about religion and secularity should be preceded by the decolonization of both of these terms and by the critical examination of the complicitous relation of Christianity and secularization in the creation of *damnation*. To put it boldly, we need to know what we owe the condemned before we begin to ask what is owed to us as subjects of faith. This requires the adoption of a *decolonial attitude*. The decolonial attitude could be related to the Christian theme of the preferential option for the poor. It only requires, in this case, thinking about the option as epistemological and about the poor as the condemned of the earth.

My concern with the narratives here is that they risk flattening out, just as Marsden does, *theological difference* and *colonial difference*. But at the same time they make clear that theological difference can be a friend of struggles from the colonial difference. It may be important, though, to elaborate distinctions such as those introduced by Walter D. Mignolo when he points to differences between ego and the theo-politics of knowledge on the one hand, and the geo- and bio-politics of knowledge on the other.<sup>16</sup> The first set helps to understand the debate between secular liberal humanism and theology, while the other set refers to the way in which the questions and concerns that emerge from the world of *damnation* (often housed in departments of women and ethnic studies) impact the academy and the theological establishment. Concepts such as "transmodernity," and distinctions between secularity and secularism, can also help in the process of figuring out the kind

of translation that is needed in order to break from the empire of Western secularity.<sup>17</sup> Without distinctions such as these and others, I fear that the narratives and analyses provided by the authors of this dossier cannot be distinguished from other positions which rely on easy and inaccurate comparisons between theology and subalternity, or those that attempt to make theology once more (now in our postmodern age) into the queen of the sciences.

## Coda

If there is some theme that is common to our narratives, in addition to those of “religion” largely construed and its tensions with the academic world it is that of race. The strong presence of race in their autobiographical narratives testifies to the central role of race in the towns where they were born, their countries, and in spaces beyond their own nations. The local, national, and transnational character of race, as it appears in these narratives, calls for a theory of racialization and its link with “religion” and “religions” which arguably supersedes the possibilities of contemporary radical orthodoxies on the one hand, and of mainstream cultural studies and Marxist formulations on the other hand. As progressive as Chakrabarty’s Marxism is, I am not sure that his short essay on “The Time of History and the Times of Gods” offers our authors an entirely viable framework to articulate a conception of the links between faith perspectives and the academy or between their “religion” or “spirituality” and their political commitments. The divide between the “Time of History” and the “Time of the Gods” brings secularity and religion to the surface, but it tends to leave behind that which is so central, along with religion and the academy, in our authors’ narratives, the dynamics of racial *damnation* (beyond the dynamics of subalternity—a Marxist concept that arguably betrays the specificity of race, just as the time of history betrays the times of the gods). The recognition of the dynamics of damnation and its role in the encounters between “religion” and the secular academy in modernity demands the articulation of new forms of translation and transgression as its response.<sup>18</sup> This form of translation embraces the location of *traces* in any one discourse, but also and more fundamentally seeks to decolonize knowledges by envisioning institutions that cannot be reduced to the limited and quite provincial translation efforts which take place in Divinity Schools or the secular university.<sup>19</sup> Alternative models of knowledge formation are nowadays multiplying strongly in the global south.<sup>20</sup> They provide fresh light into some of the problems that characterize Western forms of scholarship, including theology. Now is a good time not only to study, but also to learn from and with the *damnés*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See on this point D. G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> William D. Hart, "Can a Judgment be Read? A Response to Žižek," *Nepantla: Views from South* 4.1 (2003); William D. Hart, "Slavoj Žižek and the Imperial/Colonial Model of Religion," *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.3 (2002); Slavoj Žižek, "I Plead Guilty--But Where is the Judgment?," *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.3 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> I will expand later on the theme of hell. “Hell” is central to Frantz Fanon’s work. In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* he states that “In the majority of cases, the black lacks the benefit of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell (*Enfers*)” (8). Lewis Gordon has pointed out that although the text [*Black Skin*] has an epigraph from Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, “the suffering of which Fanon speaks gains its poetic flavor from the mythopoetics of hell that have governed many writers in the western world— namely, Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*. That Fanon’s formal education was exclusively western, and that the Martinique of his childhood was (and continues to be) predominantly Roman Catholic means that the grammar of normative life would take the form of the Church’s founding imagery in spite of Fanon’s existential atheism.” What makes this passage fascinating is the connection it makes between Fanon the atheist and his critical discourse, which is infused by Christian themes. Fanon,, just as other writers who attempt to create new grammars to understand the condition of “subalternity” engage in creative acts of translation that enrich the discourse of critique. These thinkers provide guides for reflections on these topics.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," in *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), 58-64.

<sup>6</sup> I have in mind here orthodoxies such as those of John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek. I comment on them in Nelson Maldonado Torres, "Liberation Theology and the Search for the Lost Paradigm: From Radical Orthodoxy to Radical Diversity," in *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation*, ed. Ivan Petrella (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> For an account of colonial difference see Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.1 (2002); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). I use Mignolo’s term and spell out the distinction between colonial difference and theological difference elsewhere, see Maldonado Torres, "Liberation Theology and the Search for the Lost Paradigm: From Radical Orthodoxy to Radical Diversity".

<sup>9</sup> McClintock Fulkerson writes “Perhaps my Presbyterian religiousness seems to pale in comparison to my colleagues Teresa and Kathy’s Roman Catholicism, Bill’s African American Protestantism or Muz’s stories of Almasola because it is akin to whiteness—empty and powerful, the descriptor of those of us who do not have to notice their specificity.... It may be that this is *all* my Protestant imagination is and, wielded properly, iconoclasm should put it out of its misery. However, to say that this dialectical imagination is *only* the reproduction of class, race, gender and sexual privilege is not a totalizing judgment I can make myself. That is, I cannot make it without cutting all the ground out of myself.” And, to be sure, she will not do it. Rather, she will attempt to identify in her methodological reflection what she deems the irreducible and relevant aspect of her Presbyterian Christianity for a life of activism and vigorous critique of injustice.

<sup>10</sup> Quote in Rudy from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1991), 138.

<sup>11</sup> See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. Ana Louise Keating (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Norma Alarcón, "Anzaldúa's *Frontera*: Inscribing Genetics," in *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africa: Understanding African Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> The classic formulation of this question is found in William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). See also Gordon, *Existential Africa: Understanding African Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "The Rhetoric of Modernity and the Logic of Coloniality," in *Coloniality, Transmodernity, and Border Thinking*, ed. Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> See Enrique Dussel, "World Religions and Secularization from a Postcolonial and Anti-Eurocentric Perspective," in *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, ed. Derek R. Peterson and Darren R. Walhof (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Enrique Dussel, "World System and 'Trans'-Modernity," trans. Alessandro Fornazzari, *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.2 (2002): 221-244.

<sup>18</sup> See the reflections about translation in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalization* [Web: [www.ces.fe.uc.pt/bss/documentos/wsf.pdf](http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/bss/documentos/wsf.pdf)] (2003 [cited 2003]).

<sup>19</sup> Even though I knew some of the authors of these narratives in a different context, it was through my work with Muz Ansano in the organization of a workshop on "multiple knowledges and the decolonization of expertise," that I joined the group's discussions and had the privileged of knowing all its members.

<sup>20</sup> For articulations of innovative and creative institutional/epistemological projects, see Walter D. Mignolo, "The Role of the Humanities in the Corporate University," *PMLA* 115.5 (2000): 1238-1245; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999); Catherine Walsh, "Interculturality and the Coloniality of Power. An 'Other' Thinking and Positioning from the Colonial Difference," in *Coloniality, Transmodernity, and Border Thinking*, ed. Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar (forthcoming).