

The Age of Reason is Dead, and We Sung as We Buried Him

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The Age of Reason is dead. Rejoice! We buried him in the shade of the birch tree, and we sang as we dug. We sang new and old songs of knowledges bravely earned, and those lessons became the soil we shoveled on top of him. The Age of Reason came to all of us once, and all of us, in one form or another, at one time or another, in one place or another, or all three, took a sip of his spoils just to know what it tasted like. Some of us, we are deeply ashamed to say, drained the whole glass and asked for more. We know this shame is something we cannot bury. But we did bury him.

Do you see the fresh soil underneath the birch tree's shade, atop that hill just within sight? That's where the Age of Reason lay. He promised us that knowledge could be absolute. Foundational, he said. He did not tell us that his search for the absolute was actually a flight from accountability, from fallibility, from vulnerability, but we found out just the same. How long do you think it will take for the grasses to cover that upturned soil? For daffodils to spring from that? How many generations will it take for the scars from his whips and chains and prisons to fade? Perhaps many, or perhaps even our children will not understand who he was. What his Reason made of us. What his Reason made of himself. We buried him under the birch tree and the grass and the daffodils just within sight so we could move on from him, but also so we would not so easily forget him. We affixed a gravestone to the spot, too, just in case. His life was a lesson no human should soon forget. On his gravestone we wrote "The Age of Reason is dead, and We Sung as We Buried Him. Too many of us accepted his spoils while he lived. We know this shame is something we cannot bury. But we did bury him."

The Age of Reason is dead, but we are unsure if we buried all of him. We wonder whether or not his poison seeped too deeply into our hearts. We wonder if it will grow again. He taught us that our minds are separate from our bodies. Our minds are the State, he said, and our bodies: the populace. Your mind must show complete dominion over your body, he said. Discipline and control, he said. Your body must yield to your mind, and your mind's control must be total and absolute, he said. He said that our body will only ever tell us lies, and that we must always be prepared to distrust it. He said our body could only ever be an impediment to knowledge. Some of us believed him, even as it hurt. Many of us still carry the hurt from allowing such a belief into our minds and our hearts and our hips and our fingers and our toes. Our bodies heard and felt such thoughts, such beliefs, and were betrayed. We healed our relationships to our bodies, even if only a little, as we worked with them to bury the Age of Reason. We learned new things about ourselves in our bodies and with them we sung as we buried him.

We talked with the birch tree before we buried the Age of Reason under its shade, and we asked for its consent to do so. We had long been out of the practice of asking permission of the trees, but our bodies remembered, our hearts remembered, our hips remembered, our fingers remembered, our toes remembered, and some few of us never even forgot and together they helped all of our minds remember. We were not surprised to find that remembering came easier once the Age of Reason was dead.

The birch tree offered its old gift: to wash away poison, to purify, to renew. We said that enough of us had tried to wash the poison away, and every time we had birthed another Age of Reason in the attempt. We said that nothing could renew what had been done. The losses were too great. Are too great still. We said that allowing us to bury him, and to remember the task, would be gift enough. The birch accepted, and we buried the Age of Reason. We sung as we buried him, and we remembered what should always be remembered. We did not bury anything else but him.

“[O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing [that is, a mind], and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” -René Descartes, Sixth Meditaton

Many trace the most substantial philosophical severance of the mind from the body in Western thought to the founder of modern philosophy: René Descartes. To Descartes, the body and the senses with which it connects to the external world is a hinderance to thought and to reason. The body lies to us, cannot be trusted. It can be broken down and divided; it is weak; it is mortal. The mind, on the other hand, is indivisible, supreme. It can be used, independent of the external world, to know, and to know *for sure*. The mind is our gateway to Truth, and, thus, our gateway to God and immortality. The mind then, to Descartes, must be conquered, brought to heel and thus to Reason, which is an end unto itself. From this simple belief, the Age of Reason himself springs forth. He did not die, as many claim, with the end of the Enlightenment period, but walks among us still: bestowing his Order and enforcing his Reason on all he comes across, every moment by brutal force.

It is my aim, in this essay, to declare war upon him.

I will argue that the objective, detached “knower” does not and cannot exist, that the pursuit of such a position has led to the decimation of many peoples, and that, to be free of the devastation such epistemology has wrought, we need to entirely reconstruct our understanding of what knowledge is. There are many directions one can take in attacking the Western understanding of Reason. To name a few: many feminist, Black, and Indigenous epistemologies work to undermine his hold on philosophy and knowledge. I will be mobilizing all three throughout this essay.

Attack on the Age of Reason

Reason, in the Western tradition, is something one can possess independently from all others. Knowledge can be, in this line of thinking, acquired, conquered, in solitude. Not only can Reason be formed without the input of other human beings,

but without input from all the world external from the mind. Animals, according to Descartes, are nothing but mindless automatons without souls, without intelligence, just simply excellent, unthinking machines set into motion by God. Rationality, then, becomes a key component to making the distinction between who has soul, and, therefore, value. While Descartes himself said that his third maxim was to “try to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world,” (Descartes 14) it should not be difficult for us to see how such an attitude towards the external world, combined with the atomization of the self and mind, serve as excellent fuel to the fires of colonialism and environmental destruction.

While Descartes’ rationalism is certainly not the only form of the Western epistemological tradition — David Hume, for example, believed that knowledge could *only* be developed by experiencing and studying the external world — the rational observer, standing at a detached and objective distance (termed by Thomas Nagel as “the view from nowhere”) is a central feature in all predominant Western epistemologies. One can be rational. One can objectively view the facts. One can find the Truth, and, more importantly one can *own it*. Knowledge can be private property, and it has “rightful” owners: the Men of Reason. This was a central pillar of Enlightenment thought, and to which all settlers in America are heirs. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that these values of the Age of Reason provided the drive and philosophical scaffolding for the violent colonization of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and their knowledge. Due to the belief that *they* (European colonizers) alone were in possession of Reason, and that Indigenous peoples — whose epistemologies did not align with the European’s idea of Reason and that we will explore later in this essay — were “savage,” European colonizers took it upon themselves to “rescue” Indigenous cultural artifacts, claim them as new discoveries, and render them into commodified property. According to Smith: “By the nineteenth century colonialism not only meant the imposition of Western authority over indigenous lands, indigenous modes of production and indigenous law and government, but the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultures.” (Smith 126) From the position of Reasonable arbiters of what is and is not real knowledge, European colonizers viewed, and in many ways still view, all those categorized as Other as UnReasonable, and therefore fair game for conquest and study: harkening back to Descartes’ gruesome dissections of living animals in pursuit of proof that they had no souls.

Feminist epistemology also has much to say to the Age of Reason, to the men claiming that they can achieve their view from nowhere. In her essay *Feminist Epistemology: The Subject of Knowledge*, Nancy Tuana writes:

“Early feminist epistemological work thus identified the ways that traditional conceptions of knowers as distinct, but not distinctive, occluded the fact that the

qualities required to be a knower — objectivity, disinterestedness, lack of emotionality — excluded all but privileged individuals from full achievement of that ability. In other words, traditional epistemology was based on the false assumption that a particular standpoint was neither particular, not a standpoint, and thereby obscured the linkages between knowledge and power.” (Tuana 127)

The Reasonable Man believes that his standpoint is the neutral position by referring to the assumption that white men are inherently rational. It is not by his reason alone that he arrives there, but by his structural and violent placement of all others — women, minoritized men, lgbtq+ people — in the category of inherently unreasonable. The white man, in this view, is born Reasonable! Tuana gets to the very root of the issue: “the Western epistemic *tradition* itself, due to its biased conceptions of reason, is epistemically unjust.” (Tuana 126) This tradition works only by the epistemic silencing of all but the Reasonable Man, who is white, properly educated, and propertied. This silencing happens through rendering women objects on which the Reasonable man can enact his epistemic stories. This happens by treating women of Afghanistan as helpless victims without agency subjected to the whims of “savage” Afghan men who need to be “saved” by U.S. imperialism, or by not giving credibility to women who call out sexual harassment and assault, or by seeing women’s nos as insincere. This epistemic violence is the natural result of the values of the Age of Reason, not an accidental side effect. Traditional Western Epistemology enacts patriarchy because that it what it is *built* to do.

Cornell West, in his essay *A Genealogy of Modern Racism*, gives an account of how white supremacy was formed as a vital object of Western philosophical inquiry and how that white supremacy was also not a secondary byproduct but a *structural* component of modern discourse itself via its obsession with categorizing and placing in hierarchy human traits. He speaks to Descartes’ prime location in the construction of white supremacy:

“Descartes is highly significant because his thought provided the controlling notions of modern discourse: *the primacy of the subject and the preeminence of representation*. Descartes is widely regarded as the founder of modern philosophy not simply because his philosophical outlook was profoundly affected by the scientific revolution but, more important, because he associated the scientific aim of prediction and explaining the world with the philosophical aim of picturing and representing the world.” (West 95)

This method and epistemic value, to categorize, explain, and represent the world through the eyes of Reason has been mobilized repeatedly throughout history to construct and maintain white supremacy. It lends itself naturally — we may look also to the empiricism and notorious racism of David Hume — to the measuring and categorization of human beings, especially, writes West, via physical characteristics. Establishing European whiteness as the height and standard of both Reason and Beauty, what West terms as the “normative gaze,” all physical differences —

constructed eventually as racial difference — becomes indictive of lack of intelligence and Reason. One can also see this in the belief underlying the Reasonable Man’s declaration that the history of his civilization is a history of progress: invoking thereby the Great Chain of Being, that places European whiteness at the apex of humanity, and all Others ranked below and trailing down to the “unhuman.”

These analyses are mere warning shots at the Age of Reason, many have come before and many will come after. He has been with us for centuries, and every time we thought we had struck him a death blow, he managed to stagger back to his feet once again, or else be reborn in a slightly different form that managed to trick enough of us, for a long enough time for him to regain his footing, that he was someone different. We will not be fooled much longer, and the real war against him was declared long before I took up this topic. As we prepare our siege, perhaps it will do us well to think upon what kind of knowledge we want to build after he is dead and buried.

Burying the Age of Reason

In her essay *Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning*, Manulani Aluli Meyer offers an Indigenous Hawaiian understanding of epistemology far different from the western epistemological tradition. Instead of seeking for study, unshakable (and therefore unaccountable) foundations to knowledge, Hawaiian epistemology, like many other Indigenous epistemologies, sees knowledge as a communal and inherently contextual (to place, to community) process. Knowledge is not something that an individual can acquire as property, but is something spiritual, and its truth depends on the ways it allows us to strengthen relationships with ourselves, with others, with animals, and with land. It should drive us to be of service, not boost our ego and personal power behind academy walls. Knowledge is dependent on land, and land is something that we learn *from*, not an inanimate object we just learn about. Knowledge is shaped by culture: each culture offers unique ways to understand the world around us, ourselves, and one another. Everything, according to Meyer, is created through existing in relationship, and thus knowledge is bound to how we develop relationships to and with that knowledge. Rejecting the conclusions arrived to in Western philosophy from Descartes’ mind-body dualism, Meyer writes that Hawaiian epistemology recognizes that knowledge is also inherently embodied, and unified with cognition: the two cannot be separated but instead work together to create knowledge.

The most notable, and perhaps most fundamental, difference to be noticed between traditional Western epistemology and Indigenous epistemology is the idea of what makes good or important knowledge. As Meyer writes, the Indigenous Hawaiian perspective is that knowledge that does not serve to strengthen relationships

or “heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now.” (7) The Age of Reason, on the other hand, believes that good knowledge is any knowledge that can be arrived at objectively, with a knower who is as removed and decontextualized as possible and the outcomes of acquiring such knowledge and what bloody ends they are used towards do not factor in to their validity as knowledge. From this difference, it seems that all other differences between Western and Indigenous epistemologies seem to follow. In the Western tradition, one’s personal context, even one’s own physical embodiment, is an impediment to acquiring true knowledge. In the Indigenous tradition, knowing is inherently embodied and context dependent, and this is its *strength*. Because knowledge is contextual, it offers up ways for us to understand our context truthfully. Further, recognizing ones own interrelationality as a knower/learner might even be a driving force to treat those relationships with respect and intentionality. The Age of Reason sees knowledge as something that can be *extracted*, and therefore what it is extracted from has little to no value once the knowledge is possessed. However, if, as in Meyer’s account of Indigenous epistemology, we gain our knowledge from continued relationships and in turn that knowledge must work to bolster those relationships, then we must be driven to treat those relationships with respect, as our knowledge is dependent on their continuance.

As we struggle against the Age of Reason, we can recognize that there are so many more perspectives about knowledge that we can learn from and with which we can begin to construct a different world beyond him. Indigenous philosophy has so much more to tell us, but that would take space on this essay I do not have, and I, a white settler, am not the right person to teach it all to you. However, we would be deeply amiss if we did not recognize the vital message that Black Feminist thought has to teach us about knowledge. In a review of Black Feminist philosophy, Altheria Caldera gives us a look into what Black Feminist pedagogy has to offer a world beyond the Age of Reason (and what it has to offer us *now* in our struggle against him):

“Central to each of these [Black Feminist] epistemologies are (1) the importance of social location, (2) recognition of ways of knowing that provide alternatives to traditional, dominant systems of knowing that are mostly positivistic, and (3) the role of experience in knowledge-validation.” (Caldera 39)

Like the Indigenous epistemology detailed by Meyer, experience and *location* are paramount to real knowledge. Not only is there no remove to attain, but liberatory epistemologies assert that such a remove from one’s context is not even desirable. One’s context is worthy of recognition, one’s place should be honored, one’s community deserves to be seen as a vital component to the production of knowledge. The similarities between Indigenous and Black Feminist epistemology does not stop there. Caldera also has an articulation about what constitutes as

good knowledge: “Good knowledge, then, is practical, beneficial, and facilitates problem-solving, healing, and self-development.” (69). The Age of Reason told us that good knowledge is knowledge that is unassailable, logical, and acquired by Reason. Black Feminist and Indigenous epistemology both tell us something vastly different. Good knowledge is what heals you and others, it’s what connects you to place, it’s what adds to the communal good. Not only is it to be shared, but we are engaging in a kind of theft every time we claim any knowledge as our personal property, attained by us alone. All knowing is a communal process, not just with our fellow humans but with the land and all nonhuman persons. To act morally, we must always recognize that our context conditions our knowing and that we have, then, a responsibility to take care of the peoples and the world from which we were gifted that knowledge.

The Age of Reason is not dead, but maybe, someday, we really will get to bury him. In this essay I have explored the violence done in the name and service of Reason, and I have also explored some of the different ways we can approach knowledge in a way that is respectful and mindful of our own personal context and position. Consider this one of the many shots over the bow at the Age of reason. Perhaps, should enough of us take up our epistemic, as well as our physical, arms in the struggle against him, we may eventually see him brought down.

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