

The Possibility of Pleasure: Foucault's Philosophy of the Subject and the Logic of an Appeal to Aesthetics

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Some of the most common complaints against Foucault's work are that he does not provide a philosophy of the subject and that (or, and so) he provides neither any normative grounds upon which to judge regimes of power nor alternative themes or ideals to the domination that he diagnoses. However, I argue that it is precisely because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject that he cannot suggest prescriptive action against the domination that he diagnoses.¹ Because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject he must allow for a greater human autonomy than what would allow him to prescribe action against the domination that he diagnoses. Further, and following this, I argue that Foucault's philosophy of the subject makes aesthetics the most logical place for him to look for experiences of freedom while respecting human autonomy without having to appeal to normative rhetoric or the logic of any particular discourse or form of subjection.²

Foucault's analysis of autonomous fields of discourse and his analysis of modern subjects constituted along the axis of a truth, an ethic and power are mutually re-enforcing to his philosophy of the subject. I will show how this comes about through a consideration of the analytics of finitude.

The Subject of Knowledge

Foucault's analysis of the analytic of finitude can be found in *The Order of Things* (1973). Foucault argues that it is along the lines of the analytic of finitude that modern subjects³ are constituted. I argue that his adherence to the analytic of finitude as the framework for modern thought and the constitution of modern subjects enables Foucault to develop a philosophy of modern subjects as constituted along the axis of power, ethics and truth. According to Foucault, modern subjects develop with twenti-

th century western thought's attempt to develop "a philosophical foundation for the possibilities of knowledge" (Foucault, 1973: 335).

For Foucault, subjects and subjectivities are only one mode of self-consciousness but it is the mode particular to knowledge. Because he is dealing, in *The Order of Things*, with possible foundations of knowledge and establishes that this is where modern subjects arises, he is dealing with possibilities for founding subjects and subjectivities: "the subject of Foucauldian history is a subject of *knowledge*" (Schwartz, 1998: 20). It is therefore, perfectly appropriate that we look here for Foucault's philosophy of the subject. Further, it is in part because of its relationship to knowledge that Foucault's philosophy of the subject is so amenable to aesthetics as a means of freedom. Both the analytics of finitude and aesthetics of existence require moments of 'problematization', that is, they both require moments when humans reflect upon their current situation and in so doing are transformed into subjects of knowledge (Schwartz, 1998: 21). I will go through a summary of the analytic of finitude and then show where I think this analytics of finitude means, for Foucault, that modern subjects are subjects of power, ethics and truth. In the last part of the essay I will take up the congruence of aesthetics to Foucault's philosophy of the subject.

The Analytic of Finitude: Life, Labour and Language Condition their Own Possibilities

Foucault shows that the analytic of finitude emerges with the study of Man's mode of being, the human sciences of economics, philology and biology. The analytic of finitude is a newly emergent relationship between being and representation in the human sciences, as distinct from Classical discourse, in which being and representation were found in a common locus, that of God. What characterizes this difference is that in the analytic of finitude, the line between the representation of objects, and the objects of the human sciences ceased to be transparent. For example, in the factual knowledge of biology we learn of the limitations imposed upon us by our having lived on the planet as animals already. In the factual knowledge of linguistic we learn of the limitations imposed upon what we can say today because of what humans have said already. What we can uncover in the human sciences are the limits imposed upon our lives. Within the analytics of finitude positivity bring us to our fac-

tual limitations. The particular relationship between being and representation is mediated by each of their conditions of possibility.

Now life, labour and language belong to an order of things with laws interior to themselves. In the development of modern human sciences it was required of life, labour and language that they should themselves define the conditions of their possibilities. Representations were no longer the primitive seat of the truth of living beings.

From now on there is an interior 'mechanism' in languages which determines not only each one's individuality but also its resemblances to the others: it is this mechanism, the bearer of identity and difference, the sign of adjacency, the mark of kinship, that is now to become the basis for history. (Foucault, 1973: 236)

Again, for example, in the natural sciences we find organic structures conditioning that which appears in nature. This is both a move to interiority and exteriority of representations. What is represented now is something internal to and conditioning the representation. Simultaneously, "the very being of that which is represented is not going to fall outside representation itself" (Foucault, 1973: 240). When one represents something to oneself, in these human sciences, it is only the appearance to that individual of the internal order of life, language, or labour. What appears in a representation is the external relation of that internal order with the human knower. I anticipate myself only slightly to note that what conditions these external relationships are modern subjects' limitations, which have just been uncovered.

Life, labour and language in this moment abandon what had been their natural site of representation and "withdraw into the depths of things and roll up upon themselves in accordance with the laws of life, production, and language" (Foucault, 1973: 313). Now objects of investigation appear as they do because of processes interior to themselves. Life, labour and language reach back into laws interior to themselves for their own development. Foucault argues that in this movement the objects of the modern human sciences are folding up on themselves, reaching into themselves to develop again out of their being, and so hollowing out a space within themselves. Where God had been present in the shared locus and direct link between being and representation, we

see living beings taking themselves for their own conditions of possibilities. And again, this forming of a circular link characterizes the objects of the human sciences.

Man as Knowing Subject and Known Object Arrives via his Limitations

Immediately Foucault tells us that Man arises within the hollow formed by this circular link (Foucault, 1973: 313). The circular link found within the objects of the human sciences is designated as the space of Man. Indeed, Man is required in these hollows within life, labour and language because it is he who speaks, labours and lives as an animal. Man, as an object of knowledge, therefore is given as the source of the depths of life, labour and language. When representations in language no longer are transparent, this is because Man has spoken before. When Man's biology is conditioned by an organic structure then this is because Man has evolved. And so Man is given this imperious place within the order of things, as the source of conditions making representations possible but this place is not without its ambiguity. As we saw above, positivity in the human sciences bring Man to his factual limitations.

All these contents that his knowledge reveals to him as exterior to himself, and older than his own birth, anticipate him, overhang him with all their solidity, and traverse him as though he were merely an object of nature, a face doomed to be erased in the course of history. (Foucault, 1973: 313)

So just as Man takes up the all-important central locus of life, labour and language, the same thought insists on revealing Man's limitations.

Man as a knowing subject also arises in the space hollowed out as life, labour and language condition themselves. The knowledge arises that when Man represents something, he is ordering it. In this he is a sovereign. However, that order is conditioned by something beyond his representations. In this he is an enslaved sovereign. His representations are not transparent but have limitations imposed upon them. "For modern thought, the positivity of life, of production and labour provides a foundation for the limited character of knowledge" (Foucault, 1973: 316-17). Now it appears that the way Man knows the world immediately imposes limitations on the possibilities of what he can know, of what he can

think. What he sees is not a pure truth. Rather, he sees himself ordering the world, he sees himself seeing; he is the observed spectator (Foucault, 1973: 312).

Put differently, the very internal laws of life, labour and language within man determine the external relations that Man has with his life, labour and language, which are representations. The quest of knowledge then is for the conditions, or limitations, within man, of the representations available to him.

The Quest for Impossibility

In this quest of knowledge, when facing the conditions within that make representations available to them, subjects are also always made aware of what these conditions make impossible. The study of Man's finitude thus always points to the infinity of what is impossible, that which we cannot say, do or think at the moment. "We perceive the finitude and limits they impose, we sense, as thought on their blank reverse sides, all that they make impossible" (Foucault, 1973: 314).

Also, because Man sees his thought as limited and because he sees this limitation against a back-drop of what could be otherwise, the quest of thought is not only for the grounds of representation but also for the extent of their validity. Further, because what is required is knowledge of the conditions for Man's knowledge, that knowledge is perfectible. The search for the conditions of Man's knowledge provides Man with the justification to claim perfectible knowledge.

Finitude provides itself a positive foundation for the possibility of knowledge by referring to itself ceaselessly, "from the positivity of the contents to the limitations of knowledge, and from the limited positivity of knowledge to the limited knowledge of the contents" (Foucault, 1973: 317). The limitations of Man's knowledge are the grounds for Man's knowledge. Modern thought and modern Man as an object and as a subject of knowledge are all, therefore, characterized by this analytic of finitude.

The Analytic of Finitude as a Philosophy of Modern Subjects

Having briefly outlined the analytic of finitude I want to show how I see the axis of truth and ethics, in Foucault's philosophy of the subject as deriving from an analysis of the analytic of finitude. I will consider the power of Foucault's subject shortly when I discuss the analytic of dis-

course. In the ceaseless referral of finitude to itself we see a subject emerge that must have the characteristics of a truth, "a set of relations to modes of interpretation of one's relations to self and others" and an ethic, "a set of relations to oneself and one's capacities" (Patton, 1998: 69). Modern subjects require both a truth and an ethic because of their factual limitations as revealed to them in the analytic of finitude. The subject is no longer transparent; one must necessarily relate to oneself. "Subjects appear to require this self-attachment, this process by which one becomes attached to one's own subjecthood" (Butler, 2001: 17).

Further, one must necessarily relate to the understandings of oneself and others as finite. Nor are modern subjects, as the object of thought transparent. A relationship is thereby needed between the finitude of Man as an object of study and the finitude of the Man as the subject of knowledge. One is never alone in this, one relates to oneself and interprets one's relations to oneself along the lines established within a contemporary community. "But for Foucault, it is clear that one attaches to oneself through a norm, and so self-attachment is socially mediated; it is no immediate and transparent relation to the self" (Butler, 2001: 17).

We must bear in mind that the attachments and relations that modern subjects establish with themselves arise as a mode of self-consciousness particular to the possibilities for founding knowledge. Human subjects require a truth and an ethic because their finitude is the source of all possible knowledge, particularly as this lends modern subjects the justifiable claim to perfectible knowledge. As their finitude becomes the source of all possible knowledge for modern subjects there is established a relation to their capacities, at least their capacity to know. It also immediately establishes a relation to how modern subjects think about the interpretations of themselves as factually limited knowers. The finitude of the modern knowing subject is the source, not the impossibility of all knowledge. That in itself is a mode of relating to interpretations of our capacities. Further, the knowing subject then seeks to ground their knowledge, a further relation to interpretations of relations to capacities. I have teased these threads out to make my point that it is in the analytic of finitude that Foucault finds the modern subject as one with a truth and an ethic. However, I do not understand the process to be layered or temporal as the presentation here might suggest. Rather, I prefer the notion of "ceaseless referral" to capture the sense of the process.

The Analytic of Discourse

To analyse discourse Foucault undertakes two strategies with regard to the analytic of finitude; he pins all his empirical findings to the structure of the analytic of finitude, which he has diagnosed; and he brackets off the first order experience of the phenomenologists in order that he might pin the empirical discourses he studies to the framework of the analytic of finitude, waking us from our anthropological slumber. Performing the second phenomenological bracketing is his assurance that he is not entering into normative debates within the discourses he analyses nor is he taking seriously any common-sense or everyday understanding of those involved with the discourse.

Foucault claims that he does not need to share the beliefs of those who take these serious speech acts seriously in order to locate them among all the things that are said and written. He can count on the seriousness of those involved in the actual discourse to select, and thus limit, what is taken seriously at any given period, and to defend it, criticize it, and comment upon it. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 52)

The two strategies, of pinning all his findings to the analytic of finitude and of performing the second phenomenological bracketing, are mutually re-enforcing. In applying the workings of serious discursive practices to an analytic of finitude he shows not only that discursive practices are self-supporting but also that their seriousness is grounded not in Truth, but a modern framework of thought.

In avoiding all interpretation but tracking the changes within discursive statements, Foucault can see the field of historical knowledge as a self-supporting, self-regulating field with ties to and supports with non-discursive elements in society, which set the conditions for existence of serious discursive statements. Transformations within discursive fields take place regulated by the rule-governed system⁴ of that discursive field and then whether or not a discursive statement is taken up within society will depend upon, to put it bluntly, how it might be used. Discourses then are "finite and contingent yet subject to their own rules for rarefaction" much like the self-supporting finitude of the human sciences (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 91). This allows Foucault to outline an

analytic of discursive formations, rather than enter into any normative analysis of the discursive statements that he studies.

One can equally substitute 'discourse' for 'man' in Foucault's account of the analytic of finitude: 'At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of [discourses] existence, we discover a finitude . . . The limitation is expressed not as a limitation imposed upon [discourse] from the outside, but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitations. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 92)

When the discursive field is self-supporting and autonomous then Foucault is able to show how power attaches to different serious discursive statements and enables their truth effects.

In a society such as ours-or in any society, come to that-multiple relations of power traverse, characterize and constitute the social body; they are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. (Foucault, 2003: 24).

This brings us to the third aspect of modern subjects, "a body that is trained or cultivated in certain ways (subject to 'power')" (Patton, 1998: 69). A subject, for Foucault, must have a body trained or cultivated in certain ways because of his analysis of discourse. He does not take seriously the logic, the sense or the normative debates of discourses. He therefore can argue that human subjects embody these discourses only because they can be trained or cultivated in certain ways, not because these ways are more or less human. To argue that these discourses, and their rationalities cross the bodies of human subjects, Foucault must posit a subject capable of taking up and embodying these rationalities. For example, in *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I, the body is the target of discourses of sexuality. Rather than become embroiled in a debate over, say, whether sexuality is repressed in our society, Foucault is able to see how power uses truth and truth uses power to constitute a subject of sexuality. And this then requires a body with a specific capability in relation to power. The body of modern subjects therefore must have the capacity to conduct, or transfer power in various manifestations. For it seems to

me that not only the subject but the body itself is being redefined, such that the body is not a substance, not a thing, not a set of drives, not a cauldron of resistance impulse, but precisely the site of transfer for power itself. Power happens to this body, but this body is also the occasion in which something unpredictable happens to power; it is one site of its redirection, profusion and transvaluation. (Butler, 2001: 11)

My understanding of this is that the bodies of modern subjects have a sort of enzymatic capacity for power. That is, they can take up various but not all forms of power and they transform, through their interactions with that power, both the power and the body. Using this enzymatic metaphor helps us to understand that the activation of the materiality of institutions and bodies is key to strategies of power.

If truth and power are carrying one another and the body is transferring the strategy of power through it, then power acts on our bodies through the foundation of ourselves as subjects of power, ethics and truth.

Power acts upon the body, very specifically, in the very formulation of bodily passion in its self-persistence and knowability, the very modes by which we seize upon or release a fundamental sense of identity. (Butler, 2001: 19)

Ethics and truth in Foucault's subject, as founded in the analytic of finitude, condition the possibilities of enzymatic reactions possible within any one individual subject.

Foucault's Subject is not one of Prescriptive Measures

Given the philosophy of the subject that I have outlined above, it would be absurd for Foucault to then begin to set out normative ideals and alternative prescriptions to instances of domination. This would be reasonable for a philosophy based on a subject constituted in what can be described as logical norms. But Foucault's philosophy of the subject derives from his studious avoidance of normative debates of logical sense of truth claims. In doing so, he has given us a diagnosis of that which makes possible the domination of modern subjects. Were he not to address himself to the subject he has described, but focus on some normative debate or logical norm, he would not be addressing the possibility for domination. Foucault requires a means by which to separate

knowledge/power in its pervasiveness. Foucault then must point to a freedom that can follow the lines of the three axis of modern subjectivities, which he has analyzed.

The Autonomy and Attitude of Modern Subjects

For Foucault a certain economy of power, ethics and truth always constitute modern subjects. He suggests changes in these axis in order to enhance human capacities without concomitant increases in power. "How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?" (Foucault, 1997: 317). This, apparently, would require that we adjudicate between arrangements of these axis and power. However, as I argued above, Foucault does not have the means at his disposal to adjudicate between forms of power that involve domination and those that do not, or between better and worse forms of domination or power. Foucault does have, however, the means at his disposal to respect human autonomy while conjuring a subject that has capacities necessary to an experience of freedom. I argue that the philosophy of the subject I have described from *The Order of Things*, can be found in a much later work by Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in which he sets out to characterize the autonomy of modern subjects, an attitude of modernity and to look for possibilities, within this attitude, for experiences of freedom.

In "What is Enlightenment?" (1993) Foucault describes modernity as involving a "self-critical attitude towards our present forms of social being" (Patton, 1998: 70). In his description of this attitude we can see the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude.

Modern subjects come up against their limitations, and subject these limitations to a critical examination of their conditions and in doing so become aware of what is made impossible by these limitations. Foucault is explicit in stating that such critical engagement with ourselves requires interrogation of three axis: knowledge, ethics and power (Foucault, 1997: 318). Criticism along these lines is done at the limits of our selves, the conditions of our possibility. In this work individuals examine the modes and techniques, the manner by which they are subjects of modernity. The work is done to the ends of human autonomy. Modern subjects apply themselves to their present to the ends of "modifying the pre-existing relation linking, will, authority, and the use of reason (Foucault, 1997: 305). And in this way, modern subjects might recognize the

modes, techniques and manner in which they are governed in what they are, do, think and desire.

And, as with the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude, this process brings us to the impossible. Modern subjects recognize in that which they are currently that which is contingent and “the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault, 1997: 315-316). Therefore, this is the work of criticism, “the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault, 1997: 316) and “the handbook of reason” (Foucault, 1997: 308). The work is the work of enlightenment and is done to the ends of human autonomy and freedom.

I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. (Foucault, 1997: 316)

In recognizing themselves within the historico-practical limits of their possibility, modern subjects display a “will to ‘heroize’ the present” (Foucault, 1997: 310). This is a conscious grasping of the epic⁵ in the form of the present moment. Modern subjects, in their autonomy might grasp the contingency of their present.

The high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. (Foucault 1997: 311)

Therefore, and significantly, we see that the attitude of modernity, made possible by the axis of truth, ethic and power, is one not only of recognition but also one of distinction. Foucault’s subject cuts a distinguishing figure. Both the recognition and the distinction of our present bring consciousness that things might be otherwise.

Clearly, however, Foucault cannot count on this consciousness that things might be otherwise to guarantee that things will be otherwise. The majority of his work points to domination of subjects constituted in this fashion. Foucault therefore needs to find a process for these axis of truth,

ethics and power and capacities of autonomy and distinction by which and within which human subject may become free from domination.

Returning to Aesthetics

Aesthetics is the logical place for Foucault to look for freedom for a subject constituted as the one he has analysed, in part because aesthetics are a logical place to look for freedom for a subject of knowledge. In moments of aesthetic experience there are moments very similar to those moments of problematization. Therefore, aesthetic experiences are processes that are suitable to transform a subject of knowledge. Problematization has three intertwining moments. These are “stepping back from, reflecting upon, and thematizing difficult[ies] in the games of truth” (Schwartz, 1998: 21). This will to distinction, the will to therioize the present that we saw above, is similar again to the moment of practical tension in problematization. The aestheticization of modern life therefore feeds back into itself and makes problematizations possible. This would indicate then that simply in the ceaseless referral of finitude to itself modern subjects experience aesthetic moments. This is not quite accurate however and the difference relates to what I mentioned in the previous paragraph that Foucault must find a process whereby truth can be separated from power.

For the aesthetic to provide moments when truth can be separated from power, this sensitivity to distinction and difference in form must be cultivated. A capacity to distinguish forms is central to aesthetic experience. For example, one must have silence for there to be music. “A genuinely aestheticized culture would be sensitive to differences and exclusions – not only in relation to the forms of art and design, but equally in daily life and in facing social ways of life” (Welsch, 1996: 18). And so it is precisely this aspect of the aesthetic character of modern subjects that will disturb the smooth operation of the norms and normalizing practices to which subjects refer in the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude. For Foucault, then, the development of the aesthetic will allow modern subjects to cultivate sensitivity to difference in principle.

Moments of aesthetics experience are experiences of a particular order, they are cultivated sensitivity yet are enabled by the axis and capacities of modern subjects as Foucault sees them. In moments of aesthetic experience the axis of modern subjects come together in such a

way that have a sensual experience of freedom. This is what makes aesthetics the most effective place for Foucault to turn for a solution to the pervasiveness of power/knowledge. Moments of aesthetics experience are moments when the body of modern subjects is not a transfer point of power.

This appeal to sense is logical insofar as Foucault has argued for a subject whose body is a transfer point of power. Any appeal for practices of freedom Foucault makes must, necessarily, have a sensual aspect, because the body of modern subjects has the capacity to act as a transfer point of power. Aesthetics then, for Foucault, is a chance to see truth, to work up to truths, for ourselves as modern subjects, that are untied from power. It is an opportunity to experience the possibilities for truths, which do not provide legitimation to power and domination as it crosses our bodies.

To Conclude: A Note on Pleasure

Traditionally, in aesthetics, moments of aesthetic experience, this experience of freedom is marked by pleasure. This is not to say that every pleasurable experience is an experience of freedom. The freeing transformation of the aesthetic does not just occur to us as we go about our lives as modern subjects. I made this clear in the previous paragraph. The aesthetic moment is one that must be cultivated. It is a moment that is arrived at through attention to the aesthetic. And this is why Foucault draws aesthetics to our attention. In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault is arguing that we have the capacities with which to cultivate our freedom. Significantly, given Foucault's philosophy of the subject, the cultivation of freedom is necessarily experienced as pleasurable.

Notes

1. I acknowledge the huge debate in the literature concerning this issue and the work that has been done to sort out, in Foucault's work, questions of subject, subjectivity, and capacities. However, this paper does not stem from an engagement with those debates, but rather, a close reading of The Order of Things.
2. Although Foucault makes much of his efforts to avoid appeals to common sense and to bracket off the sense individuals make of their social situation, he appeals, in his aesthetics of existence, to a sensual experience to bring human subjects to an experience of freedom. This may appear at first sight to be

paradoxical or even irreconcilable. I, however, argue that it is not because of his philosophy of the subject.

3. Throughout the text of The Order of Things Foucault discusses the emergence of Man, as the object of human sciences. I have kept this language myself to refer to the object of human sciences, as it was. However, when discussing Foucault's philosophy of the subject that derives from his study of the human sciences and their object, I've changed the language. This is for two reasons. The first, of course, is to try to account for the fact that it was not only men that emerged with Man, but women also. The second is that later in the paper I will want to refer to modern subjects more generally and I want to avoid confusion. I argue that I am justified in such a move by arguing that the mode of self-consciousness particular to knowledge is of subjects with subjectivities, and that this is indeed, the particular mode Foucault was studying in The Order of Things.

4. The debates around structuralism and whether or what kind of structuralism Foucault employs is beyond the scope of this paper. My point here is that Foucault analyses discursive formations as self-supporting and self-regulating.

5. I conceive of this heroization or presentation of the epic of the present by thinking of it as a valorization of the significance of all that the present is, given all that it might have been.

References

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Errata

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Terry M. Provost and Terry Marie Provost should read Terry Provost.

Provost Notes:

Note 9: See "The Abolitionist," <http://afgen.com/slave1.html> and "Biographical Sketches," <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/malesupp/bio.htm>

Note 10: On the invitation was a pair of breasts, vivisected and printed beside the title "I Love Titty": A Celebration of the Female Breasts as Lifeforce and Sexual Focus. Tony Bardarch's archives.

Note 11: On his website, "On Cultural Appropriation," Ron Stacey claimed that: "Artists in their works mustn't concern themselves with boundaries of convention, racism, sexism, religion, chauvinism etc., except perhaps to expose the human vagaries involved therein. To do so is to be not an artists, but a propagandist." This passage reads as the depoliticisation of an artist's responsibility to work through complex issues. See his full essay at <http://www.aabc.com/lotos/forum/approp.htm>.

Provost References:

Edmondson, Locksley. "Trans-Atlantic Slavery and the Internationalization of Race." *CQ/Caribbean Quarterly* 22.1 (March 1976) 5-25.

P91 – Last paragraph: a comma should be placed between "Blacks" and "diffused".

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