GLOBALIZATION IS A relatively new venture in the history of human civilization. It is a movement to create a new world, and it defines the intellectual climate of our time. Since everything, including globalization, is a matter of communication, the late Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “a global village” to describe the shrinking world created by the electronic mass media, which has superseded the Gutenberg age of printing. That expression, a global village, has become so commonplace that many of us forget who invented it. Without understanding its proper meaning, the expression may sound as though it contradicts the popular idea that the world today is moving toward a cosmopolis. McLuhan’s faithful followers have now “digitalized” the global village, in a phenomenon that might be called “McLuhan 2.0.” In terms of media or communication technology, McLuhan — whose masterpiece, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962), popularized the notion of a global village — had an unerring sense of the flow and rhythm of Western history since the Homeric oral culture of ancient Greece. His controversial assertion that “the medium is the message” scales Western history in broad strokes as much as it does communication theory.
Because we are living in the midst of multiculturalism, the neologism *globalization* — the somewhat inelegant term coined by *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman — signifies the interdependence of the global and the local or the rootedness of the global in the local: the global without the local is empty and the local without the global is myopic. In the context of this essay, my notion of “global Asia” is twofold. First, Asia is being globalized. Second, Asia is globalizing the rest of the world. This global confluence of Asia and non-Asia is a two-way process. The end result of globalization is neither to hold on to anachronistic national/cultural identities nor to establish a futuristic “one world” with “one government,” if that were ever possible. Rather, it nurtures a non-polar middle path between the global and the local that shuns abstract universalism, on the one hand, and ethnocentric particularism, on the other. In other words, it is what I call a *transversal* or *cross-cultural* world that “hybridizes” or “creolizes” variant cultures and ethnicities.

**EUROCENTRISM AS THE LEGACY OF WESTERN MODERNITY**

There is nothing trite about emphasizing the fact that all understanding, all thinking, is comparative. Comparison is the method of discovering the limits of one’s own discourse by viewing it in the light of foreign or “other” discourse, which is always more or less exotic. The global exchange of ideas and values would advance a “world republic” of literature in the spirit of the German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “world literature” (*Weltliteratur*) — a literature that goes across and beyond national boundaries.

Ethnocentrism, great or small, has filtered through some of the finest minds in the modern intellectual history of the West, from Baron de Montesquieu to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx to Karl Wittfogel. There are always, of course, exceptions: the likes of Voltaire, Gottfried Leibniz, Alexander von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder, for example, was a judicious
advocate of the comparative, and he refused to identify truth and felicity with just being European or Western.

The mindset called Eurocentrism sees itself as the anointed guardian of the cultural, scientific/technological, political, economic and even moral *capital* of the entire globe. By constructing a great dividing wall between the East and the West, Eurocentrism willfully engages in “a kind of intellectual apartheid regime in which the superior West is quarantined off from the inferior East” — to use the expression of the intellectual historian John M. Hobson. “Modernization” is nothing but the all-encompassing catchword given to the process whereby Eurocentrism sweeps through the entire globe like a wildfire. By positioning itself as the teleological temple of the world, Eurocentrism becomes a tribal idolatry. As the astute interpreter and critic of Western modernity and Eurocentrism, the British postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, relates his observation on the arrogance of Eurocentrism:

From at least the 17th century and well into the 20th, the writing elite of Western Europe and its footholds on other continents considered its own way of life as a radical break in universal history. Virtually unchallenged faith in the superiority of its own mode over all alternative forms of life — contemporaneous or past — allowed it to take itself as the reference point for the interpretation of the *telos* of history. This was a novelty in the experience of objective time; for most of the history of Christian Europe, time-reckoning was organized around a fixed point in the slowly receding past. Now... Europe set the reference point of objective time in motion, attaching it firmly to its own thrust towards *colonizing the future in the way it had colonized the surrounding space* (emphasis added).

Indeed, this Eurocentric idea of colonizing the future gives a new meaning to the conception of modernity as an unfinished project or as the end of history in conquering the entire globe as the converging point of time and space.

**THE DAO OF TRANSVERSALITY: BEYOND THE EUROCENTRIC POLITICS OF UNIVERSALITY**

The concept of “transversality” is the pivotal issue of this essay, which is defined and formulated in terms of phenomenology — the philosophical movement initiated by Edmund Husserl at the turn of the 20th century. It has thus far gone through transcendental, existential, hermeneutical, deconstructive and transversal stages. Phenomenology as a mode of philosophy is not made of a fixed and static set of doctrines and dogmas. Its true vitality resides in its capacity to transform itself.

Phenomenology often begins anew by inventing concepts to come to terms with the world *always already in transition*. In today’s multicultural and globalizing world, we are in dire need of new concepts to explore changing realities. It is, in a manner of speaking, a phoenix rising from the ashes of the universality that is such an essential part of Eurocentrism. By de-centering or de-provincializing Eurocentrism, it intends to go beyond and transfigure the Eurocentric grand narratives of universality. It is truly an *interruption* (*inter/ruption*) in the etymological sense of the term. Thus, it may be conceived of, and spelled as, “trans(uni)versality.” As a paradigm shift in our thinking, it may be likened to the lateral movement of digging a new hole, instead of
digging the same hole deeper and deeper with no exit in sight. Transversality goes beyond the hierarchical binary oppositions — for example, between mind (the rational) and body (the sensory), man and woman, humanity and nature, and West and East. It abandons the notion that what is particular in the West is universalized or universalizable, whereas what is particular in the non-West or East remains forever particular.

Viewed in this way, claims of universality dressed up in the garb of ethnocentrism have no validity in the philosophy of transversality, which challenges the assumed transparency of truth as universal and overcomes the limits of universality as the Eurocentric canon of truth in Western modernity, particularly in the 18th century Western Enlightenment. It aims to de-center Europe as the site of universal truth and expose its failure to take into account a plurality of cultures or a world of multiculturalism. The unchallenged universalist should be aware of the profound message that is contained in the noted Japanese film Rashomon, directed by Akira Kurosawa, which presents four different but equally plausible accounts of the same murder. In the context of transversality, it raises a red flag and provides an invaluable lesson for inter-cultural understandings.

In what follows, I will seek to define transversality by appropriating some of the philosophical insights of close fellow-travelers in phenomenology, the American Calvin O. Schrag, the French phenomenologist and my favorite philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the Martiniquan francophone and junior compatriot of Franz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, whose “poetics of relation” employ the notions of “creolization” or “hybridization.”

ENGAGEMENT ACROSS BOUNDARIES AND DIFFERENCES

Inspired both directly and indirectly by the insights of continental European philosophers, the American existential phenomenologist Calvin O. Schrag develops the idea of transversality as an engagement and enrichment of thought across differences, and embraces the notion of truth as a process of communication, especially global communication. Using geometry as a metaphor, transversality for Schrag denotes the crossing of two diagonal lines in any given parallelogram. It is a search for “convergence without coincidence,” “commonality without identity,” and “cooperation without uniformity.” In an effort to redefine rationality in a way that forges a middle way between the modernist tendency to over-determine the role of reason and the postmodern tendency to under-determine the role of reason, transversality as a philosophy has become a radically new project capable of navigating the stormy channel between the “Scylla of a hegemonic unification,” on the one hand, and the “Charybdis of a chaotic pluralism,” on the other. One comes to understand transversality by recognizing that it splits the difference between the two extremes. In other words, transversality deconstructs Eurocentrism, the mission of which is to proselytize the universality of the rational.

To the extent that transversality is the negotiated or compromised “middle voice,” it also touch
es the soul and heart of Buddhism. I would suggest that the famous wooden statue, pictured here, of the priest Hoshi (Baozi) at Saio Zen temple in Kyoto, Japan, which is now housed in the Kyoto National Museum, embodies the mantra of transversality. The Buddha’s face — the “soul of the body,” as Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed it, that speaks of the world in transformation — marks a new dawn of awakening (satori), signaling the beginning of a new regime of ontology, culture, ethics and politics. From the crack of the middle of the face of the old Buddha statue, there emerges an interstitial, luminal face that signifies a new transfiguration and transvaluation of the existing world. The icon of the emerging face symbolizes the arrival of Maitreya (the “future Awakened One,” Bodhisattva) or the Middle Way — the third enabling term of transversality that is destined to navigate the difficult waters of intercultural border-crossings. We are warned not to take it as a middle point between two polarities. Rather, it breaks through bipolarity (e.g., mind and body, man and woman, humanity and nature, East and West). What is important here is the fact that transversality symbolized in the face of the Buddha statue is the paradigmatic rendition of overcoming any bipolarity.

Merleau-Ponty spoke of the “lateral universal” and
the lateral continuity of all humanity both “primitive” and “civilized” across history. He is unmistakably a consummate transversalist. In contrast to “linear,” the term lateral is extraordinarily suggestive in the globalizing world of multiculturalism. The “lateral universal” for him is meant to be a new paradigm for world-making as well as for world philosophy. All history is not only contemporaneous and written in the present tense but also an open notebook in which a new future can be inscribed. It is unfortunate, I think, that his effort at comparative philosophy and his sensitivity to the global scope of philosophy have escaped the attention of comparative philosophers.

In his critique of Hegel’s Eurocentrism, Merleau-Ponty is most poignant. In the conceit of Eurocentrism, the modernist Hegel judged the “Oriental philosophy” of China (and India) in a cavalier fashion. His Lectures on the History of Philosophy show at times an inexcusable philosophical truancy. He is totally dismissive of the importance of Chinese philosophy in world philosophy as “elementary” (infantile), and he describes the Chinese yin-yang trigrams and hexagrams as “superficial,” and the Chinese composition of elements (fire, water, wood, metal and earth) as “all in confusion.” Then he superciliously caps his commentary on Confucius: “We have conversations between Confucius and his followers in which there is nothing definite further than a commonplace moral put in the form of good, sound doctrine, which may be found as well expressed and better, in every place and amongst every people. Cicero gives us De Officiis, a book of moral teaching more comprehensive and better than all the books of Confucius [emphasis added]. He [Confucius] is hence only a man who has a certain amount of practical and worldly wisdom — one with whom there is no speculative philosophy [emphasis added].”

It is clear that Hegel’s judgment is both rash and Eurocentric in its cultural references. The concept of universal truth is Western in origin, born out of Western narcissism and ethnocentric ignorance. Hegel’s myopic view of universal truth may be likened to the Korean proverbial frog who lived in a deep well, looked up to the sky one day, and squealed with delight: “that’s the universe!” For Merleau-Ponty, the West invented an idea of truth itself, and there is no one philosophy that contains all philosophies. Rather, philosophy’s center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere: truth is concentric/polycentric, that is, it must be acquired by means of transversality.

Merleau-Ponty contends that Hegel arbitrarily drew “a geographical frontier between philosophy and non-philosophy,” that is, between the West and the East. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, all philosophies are anthropological types and none has any monopoly on truth. European philosophy in the guise of universality is as much ethno-philosophical as Chinese philosophy. However, Hegel’s Eurocentric philosophy assumes that what is essentially ethno-philosophical in the West is in fact universal, whereas what is ethno-philosophical in China (and India) remains ethno-philosophical forever. Thus Eastern philosophy is dismembered from the exclusive club of philosophy itself. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological orientation focuses attention on the ethnography of all socio-cultural life-worlds, without which philosophy is merely a vacuous abstraction. He suggests that, in contrast to the “overarching universal” of objective sciences, as well as Western metaphysics or speculative philosophy, the “lateral universal” takes into account ethnographical experience as a way of “learning to see what is ours as alien and what was alien as our own.” His “lateral universal” or “transversal” is a passport, as it were, that allows us to cross borders between diverse cultures, enter the zone of intersection and discover cross-cultural connections and convergences where we ultimately discover confluences. While the European geo-philosophical politics of identity claims its validity as universal truth, the “lateral universal” takes into account “local knowledge” on the path to global knowledge (dubbed by some as “globalization”) and allows for the hermeneutical autonomy of “the other,” who may very well be right. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s “lateral universal” represents an open-ended and promiscuous web of temporal and spatial interlacings.

He contends that the conceited path of Hegel
that excludes Chinese thought from universal knowledge and draws a geographical frontier between philosophy and non-philosophy also excludes a good part of Western history itself. Philosophy as a perpetual beginning is open to examining its own idea of truth again and again because truth is “a treasure scattered about in human life prior to all philosophy and not divided among doctrines.” In this light, Western philosophy itself is destined to re-examine not only its own idea of truth, but also related matters and institutions such as science, economics, politics and technology. An unexamined life, indeed, is not worth living. Merleau-Ponty writes with poignancy and relevance for the cultural exchanges in our multicultural and globalizing world:

From this angle, civilizations lacking our philosophical or economic equipment take on an instructive value. It is not a matter of going in search of truth or salvation in what falls short of science or philosophical awareness, or of dragging chunks of mythologies as such into our philosophy, but of acquiring — in the presence of these variants of humanity that we are so far from — a sense of the theoretical and practical problems our institutions are faced with, and of re-discovering the existential field that they are born in and that their long success has led us to forget. The Orient’s “childishness” has something to teach us, if it were nothing more than the narrowness [and rigidity, I might add] of our adult ideas. The relationships between Orient and Occident, like that between child and adult, is not that of ignorance to knowledge or non-philosophy to philosophy; it is much more subtle, making room on the part of the Orient for all anticipations and “prematurations.” Simply rallying and subordinating “non-philosophy” to true philosophy will not create the unity of the human spirit. It already exists in each culture’s lateral relationships to the others, in the echoes one awakes in the other [all emphases added].

In Hegel’s thought, there can be no genuine, global dialogue between the “philosophy” of the Occident and the “non-philosophy” of the Orient. In light of the critique of Hegel’s Eurocentrism that is contained in Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the “lateral universal,” we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the seminal contribution of Glissant to defining the notion of a transversal world. Glissant is a philosopher, a poet, a novelist and a political activist whose “aesthetics of relation” shaped Caribbean discourse on what he called “diversality” and “creoleness.” His views have an uncanny similarity to Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Hegel; Glissant says his poetics of “transversal relation” are meant to replace “the old concept of the universal.” “Thinking about One,” he puts it concisely and emphatically, “is not thinking about All” (La pensée de l’Un soit pas pensée du Tout). He would even agree with the postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy who speaks of an “imperialistic particularism dressed up in a seductive universal garb.” Speaking of Hegel’s Eurocentric conception of history, Glissant retorts: “History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the world...” He rejects Hegel’s “linear, hierarchical vision of a single History” as passé in the postcolonial world of multiculturalism.

For Glissant, transversality embodies the way of crossing and going beyond ethnic, lingual and cultural boundaries (i.e. creating the hybridized/creolized). The French word errance that he uses means “to be at home in several languages and cultures while not cutting off the umbilical cord to one’s native land.” Glissant’s transversal man-
Our journey is to discover the unknown continent of a new reality as well as a new way of philosophizing. In a globalizing world, meanings, ideas and values do travel and migrate everywhere, in all directions — from West to East, from North to South, and above all diagonally — a phenomenon that has the potential to reduce if not eradicate the “ethnocentric ignorance” of the “foreign other.” However, there can be no true cross-cultural

manifesto is an existential exercise and thought experiment in what we might call “global imaginaries” based on the Caribbean archipelago as a constellation of small islands, which is the supreme symbol of interconnectedness and interdependence. For him, therefore, transversality, hybridity, and creoleness may be used interchangeably. As he puts it, the poetics of “diversality” seeks “a transversal relation, without any universalist transcendence.” Creoleness, too, is the way of discovering Caribbean “subterranean convergence from within. As it is indigenous to the Caribbean archipelago, it is the “cross-breeding” (métissage) of Western and non-Western ethnicity, language and culture. Because “cross-breeding” signifies “multiple converging paths,” the intermingled histories of the Caribbean people liberate them from the all-encompassing vision of a single history. “Caribbeanness” is the root of a cross-cultural relationship that mutates culturally, ethnically and linguistically. It frees its people from sameness and uniformity. The British postcolonial theorist Robert J. C. Young, who calls Eurocentrism a “white mythology,” makes an astute comment that “postcolonialism is neither western nor non-western, but a dialectical (i.e. transversal) product of the interaction between the two, articulating new counterpoints of insurgency from the long-running power struggles that pre-date and post-date colonialism.” The Creole is neither unitarian nor separatist but is likened to a hybrid, multi-colored “butterfly” (Glissant’s word) who gets free by breaking out of an “ethnocentrist cocoon.” Glissant himself describes the quintessence of creoleness:

Diversity, which is neither chaos nor sterility, means the human spirit’s striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence. Diversity sees the presence of peoples [multitude] no longer as objects to be swallowed up, but with the intention of creating a new relationship. Sameness requires fixed Being. Diversity establishes Becoming. Just as Sameness began with expansionist plunder in the West, Diversity came to light through the political and armed resistance of peoples. As Sameness was within the fascination with the individual, Diversity is spread through the dynamism of communities. As the Other is a source of temptation of Sameness, Wholeness is the demand of Diversity... In other words, if it was necessary for Sameness to be revealed in the solitude of individual Being, it is now imperative that Diversity should “pass” through the whole communities and people. Sameness is sublated difference; Diversity is accepted difference [emphasis added].

A WORLD OF HYPHENS AND HYBRIDS

Thus, the Holy Grail of universality as a Eurocentric quest gives way to the new project of transversality. This thought-experiment calls for a willingness to risk the safety and complacency of philosophical self-sufficiency — or the belief in the universality of one’s own philosophical traditions. Our journey is to discover the unknown continent of a new reality as well as a new way of philosophizing. In a globalizing world, meanings, ideas and values do travel and migrate everywhere, in all directions — from West to East, from North to South, and above all diagonally — a phenomenon that has the potential to reduce if not eradicate the “ethnocentric ignorance” of the “foreign other.” However, there can be no true cross-cultural
Think and imagine their social existence by relating themselves to others through an engaging and normative global interconnectedness.

There can be no one philosophy that monopolizes truth: truth is concentric or transversal. In a world of hyphenations and hybridizations, no one culture can claim its independence, self-referentiality or self-sufficiency. As the old Chinese saying goes, everything is related to everything else in the cosmos and thus nothing exists or can exist in isolation (i.e., the principle of synchronicity in the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, where everything is said to change except change itself). We are indeed interdependent with one another, not only among humans alone but also among all things.

The Foucauldian Edward W. Said warned us of the danger of “essentializing” a culture that occasions and spawns “culture wars” and hinders cross-cultural dialogues and conversations. As he puts it, we must avoid the mode of Occidentalizing the Occident, Orientalizing the Orient, Africanizing Africa, Americanizing America, Koreanizing Korea, and so on. “Essentialization” is the seat of civilizational “clashes” and “culture wars.”

Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together. . . . But for [this] kind of wider perception we need time and patience and skeptical enquiry supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.
Globalization, too, is a process that facilitates the exchange of ideas and values at the crossroads of all sides. Ultimately, the future cultivation of global humanity will become, it is hoped, more tri-continental (Asian, African and Latin American) and less European or Euro-American. Globalization is nothing but the middle way of cross-pollinating and cross-fertilizing cultural meanings, ideas and values in multiplicity. It enhances our chances for cosmopolitanism. The new phoenix of cosmopolitanism in modernity, whose language is interspersed with such prefixes as inter, con and trans, has risen from the ashes of sovereign nation-states that the modernist Hegel deified as the political telos of his philosophy. It fosters a non-polar middle path between the global and the local that shuns both abstract universalism and ethnocentric particularism.

The “essentialization” of culture that reifies or vilifies the foreign other is not conducive to cosmopolitanism. The civility of which aims at making us feel at home in the world. As an active principle, civility goes beyond just tolerating differences. In the language of postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, it is “the desire to dwell convivially with difference.” Merleau-Ponty spells out the true spirit of civility when he speaks of the reversibility of “ourselves as strangers” and “strangers as ourselves.” In the postmodern age of cosmopolitanism, civility advances our communication and interaction with “foreign others” without holding their “foreignness” against them (i.e. us against them).

As a transversal concept, cosmopolitanism is a way of making us at home with a world that is unmistakably polyphonic. Without it, the buzzword globalization, or localization, would be an empty slogan or a disguised form of conquest. In tune with global humanity, there would be global Asia, global Korea, global China, global Japan, and so on. Reflecting on the condition of global lifeworlds, philosophy, too, is poised for radical transformation. Most importantly, what is traditionally called “comparative philosophy” is no longer neglected, it radically transforms the very mode of philosophizing and thus the conception of truth itself. By the same token, the philosopher must be a virtual globetrotter in his thought. It is high time to bury the metaphor of philosophy as the “owl of Minerva” that takes flight at dusk. Philosophy should be conceptualized and cast into metaphor as the Muse who can play mousike (i.e. recite, sing, dance and dramatize) for, and orchestrate, the global harmonics of inter-human and even interspecies relationships at the dawn of a new day.

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