



Sylvia Wynter

ON BEING HUMAN AS PRAXIS

Katherine McKittrick, editor

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For Ellison

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The rule is love.

SYLVIA WYNTER, *MASKARADE*

It is difficult to imagine this book as a complete and bounded work. While writing and reading and editing and sharing ideas—processes and conversations that have unfolded since about 2006 yet began well before this time—the text and its ideas have been consistently ajar. It has also witnessed, across the planet and with uneven responses, the Arab Spring and ongoing struggles in Syria, increasing man-made disasters and resource exploitation, wide use of unmanned drones, credit crises, the Occupy movements and student protests, the preventable deaths of Troy Davis, Michael Jackson, Mark Duggan, Whitney Houston, Trayvon Martin, and more, the election of Barack Obama, Idle No More, prisoner strikes in Atlanta, California. . . . Indeed, in Toronto, Ontario, where I write from and dwell, and in Kingston, Ontario, the prison-university town where I teach, and across Canada, prisons are, quietly and not, proliferating fictionally benevolent geographies. The 2012 Marikana (Lonmin) strike—the protest of a variety of appalling work conditions—resulted in miners being threatened and killed, reminiscent of, but not twinning, the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. I hope these kinds of events, and the many more unlisted—and it is worth underscoring the asymmetrical time-place reverberations of the events noted and unspoken and yet-to-come—in some small way *connect to* this work, thus drawing attention to the ways in which the ideas put forth are incomplete and unbounded and grounded and, to use Sylvia Wynter's phraseology, correlational. Our work is unfinished.

Any engagement with Sylvia Wynter demands openness. And without the support, conversations, words, creativity, hospitality, commitment, and energy of Sylvia Wynter—her openness to my ideas and this book, and her willingness to return to many conversations left ajar—this project would not have materialized and with this found spaces to critically examine and imagine the unlisted and the unspoken, the yet-to-come, and our unrealized futures. More than this, Sylvia’s generosity, coupled with her prodigious knowledge and commitment to meticulously mapping out big ideas in very particular ways, tore up and tore open my mind and my heart as our conversations provided, at least for me, a new context within which to envision radical collaborative and correlational narratives. More specifically, the dialogue, formalized in the chapter “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?” but underlying the text as a whole, not only is founded on Wynter’s invaluable intellectual mentorship and call-and-response but also signals the difficult task of situating our intellectual questions outside our present system of knowledge in order to historicize and share our futures differently. I learned and continue to learn a lot from Sylvia—about reading, writing, and friendship, about the high styles and the low styles, about the intellectual *life* her generation of Caribbean intellectuals amassed, about the science of the word, and about the difficulties of waiting and the pleasures of anticipation. This editor, then, ajar, extends warm appreciation to Sylvia for her ongoing friendship and conversations.

Wading through the openness of not quite arriving at the yet-to-come, and arriving again and again—stopping, too—in our unfinished histories, as these time-space processes are generated from the perspective of the ex-slave archipelago: many colleagues and friends have interrupted and stopped and dwelled on the ideas put forth. The essayists, I thank, for sharing their ideas and for writing challenging pieces that will enhance how we read the work of Wynter and engage decolonial scholarship.

Rinaldo Walcott has worked on this book with me, inside and out, since I began dreaming it. In addition to contributing his ideas within, he was an early interlocutor with Wynter, in Oakland, California, in 2007. This project would be very different if Rinaldo, a stalwart intellectual and stellar friend, did not imagine it with me. I appreciate Rinaldo’s critical engagement, his thoughtful insights, and his willingness to engage the creative-intellectual-physiological contours of black life with me. His ideas inspire, and he made this work believable for me, in a world where blackness is an unbelievable and surprising wonder.

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Friends, family, and colleagues, too, who have had an eye on this project since it began and have brought their spirited support to the work within—in essay form and not: Alexander Weheliye, Demetrius Eudell, Lisa Lowe, the McKittricks and Zillis, across nomenclatures, and my mother, Valerie Brodrick, who insists we cherish the conviviality of recipes. Mark Campbell, Jack Dresnick, Johanna Fraley, and Nick Mitchell each contributed to different portions of the long conversation between Wynter and McKittrick—transcribing, editing, listening, responding, translating. I can only describe this work as heavy work—difficult, thick, grave. The long conversation has had many, many versions and several iterations, and all of these scholars generously shared their time and ideas with both Sylvia and me between 2007 and 2014. Katherine Mazurok, Stephanie McColl, and Joanne Farall also assisted with some tediously significant bibliographic details, which I thank them for, immensely. Nick Mitchell and Jack Dresnick especially, have been my constants-in-California, working closely with Sylvia but also lending me their ears and ideas and inspiration. During his research at the Institute of the Black World Archives at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Nick also—to his surprise—came across the photograph of Wynter that is used for the cover of this text. Ned Morgan, trusted long-time friend, assisted with early copyedits.

At Duke University Press, Jade Brooks and Ken Wissoker have assisted with many aspects of the manuscript, supporting the initial vision, administering the text at each stage, and allowing it to organically unfold while also ensuring that the practicalities were accounted for. More than this, their ongoing excitement about the collection has allowed me to work patiently with Wynter and her ideas and consider the manuscript, as a whole, a meaningful and worthwhile project. What of Wynter without having time to dwell with Wynter? The comments of the anonymous referees, greatly appreciated, were perceptive, straightforward, and amazingly useful and strengthened the overall manuscript.

The insights and support of the already and yet to be listed—Simone Browne, Walcott, and Ray Zilli—have been especially relevant to my ongoing preoccupation with the writings of Sylvia Wynter, and each has differently lived with the discursive and affective outcomes that continue to emerge as I read, write, and think the futures she offers. Zilli has, too, made me at home with these and other difficult ideas by encouraging me to keep unraveling and working them out—which, after many years and a

long-standing mistrust of the real and imagined geographies of home, provides a kind of comfortable but unsettling intellectual clarity that demands unexpectedness. Ellison McKittrick Zilli witnessed the final stages of the book and will, I hope, as dedicatee, keep the text, and the ideas Wynter imparts, ajar.

1 **YOURS IN THE INTELLECTUAL STRUGGLE**

Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living

Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities. . . . And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.

SYLVIA WYNTER, "THE POPE MUST HAVE BEEN DRUNK, THE KING OF CASTILE A MADMAN"

People ask me, "Why don't you write an autobiography?" But I have never been able to think that way. My generation I think, would find it impossible to emphasize the personal at the expense of the political.

SYLVIA WYNTER, "THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF HUMANISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIA WYNTER"

The epigraphs that begin this introduction draw attention to a challenge: How to introduce the analytical, creative, and intellectual projects of Sylvia Wynter, as well as her biographical narrative, *all at once*, while also looking forward, noncircuitously and without anticipatory repetition, to the essays and conversations within? The challenge folds over, too, to notice the extensive and detailed corpus Wynter has put forth—more than two hundred texts and presentations—which comprise dramatic plays, translations, essays, plenaries, symposia, and creative works.¹ Her work speaks to a range of topics and ideas that interweave fiction, physics, neurobiology, film, music, economics, history, critical theory, literature, learning practices, coloniality, ritual narratives, and religion and draw attention to epistemological ruptures such as the secularization of humanism, the Copernican leap, Darwin-

ian modes of biological representation, Fanonian sociogeny, the 1960s. The depth with which she reads texts and her innovative approach to thinking through the ways in which we live and tell our stories have resulted in an intellectual oeuvre that patiently attends to the ways in which our specific conception of the human, Man, curtails alternative models of being, the fullness of our interrelated human realization, and a new science of human discourse. Across her creative texts and her essays, Wynter demonstrates the ways in which a new, revalorized perspective emerges from the ex-slave archipelago and that this worldview, engendered both across and outside a colonial frame, holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling—*not replacing or occupying*—Western conceptions of what it means to be human.

While readers unfamiliar with Wynter's work can turn to any number of her essays and enter the conversation from a variety of perspectives, much of her vast and detailed writing life is tracked and explored by both Wynter and David Scott in his incredible interview, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism," in *Small Axe*.² In this interview Wynter's experiences as an anticolonial figure emerge not as *inciting* the political vision put forth in her writings but rather as *implicit* to a creative-intellectual project of reimagining what it means to be human and thus rearticulating who/what we are. The process of rearticulation is important to highlight because it underscores relationality and interhuman narratives. Here, the question-problem-place of blackness is crucial, positioned not outside and entering into modernity but rather the empirical-experiential-symbolic site through which modernity and all of its unmet promises are enabled and made plain. *With* this, stands Wynter's subjective-local-specific-diasporic anticolonial unautobiography (see the second epigraph here), articulated *alongside* the physiological—neurochemical-induced—wording of hope and desire within the context of total domination (see the first epigraph). Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny/a new science of the word.³

Wynter's anticolonial vision is not, then, teleological—moving from colonial oppression outward and upward toward emancipation—but rather consists of knots of ideas and histories and narratives that can only be legible in relation to one another. Here it is crucial to notice that her oeuvre can be compared to and in conversation with Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, Elsa Goveia, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, C. L. R. James, and Édouard Glissant, among others; this is an intellectual project that, therefore, practices co-identification and cocitation and honors the conceptual frame it promises. It is through reading across texts and genres,

knitting together and critically engaging a variety of intellectual narratives from the natural sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and art worlds, as these insights are produced in the shadow of colonialism, that Wynter's anticolonial insights come forth. These knots of histories and ideas and relational narratives, together, emerge in different ways throughout this collection. Painstakingly avoiding an overview of key themes in Wynter's work—Man1, Man2, sociogeny, the science of the word, *propter nos*, auto-poiesis, counterdoctrines, adaptive truths, archipelagos of poverty—I draw the reader's attention to the essays within, which touch on, extend, and converse with these concepts and, in very different ways, join Wynter in opening up the possibility of a new science of human discourse: "a sense that in every form that is being inscripted, each of us is also in that form, even though we do not *experience* it. So the human story/history becomes the collective story/history of these multiple forms of self-inscription or self-instituted genres, with each form/genre being adaptive to its situation, ecological, geopolitical."⁴

The Essays

This is a project that speaks to the interrelatedness of our contemporary situation and our embattled histories of conflicting and intimate relationalities. The project is about how our long history of racial violence continues to inform our lives and our anticolonial and decolonial struggles. The work thinks about and interrogates how the figure of Man—in Wynter's formulations—is the measuring stick through which all other forms of being are measured. And, it is a work that seeks to ethically question and undo systems of racial violence and their attendant knowledge systems that produce this racial violence as "commonsense." This is not a project of reviling and thus replacing Man-as-human with an ascendant figure; rather it draws attention to a counterexertion of a new science of being human and the emancipatory breach Wynter's work offers. The writers here work closely with the writings of Sylvia Wynter, bringing into focus the ways in which she asks us to think carefully about the ways in which those currently inhabiting the underside of the category of Man-as-human—under our current epistemological regime, those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason—can, and do, provide a way to think about being human anew. Being human, in this context, signals not a noun but a verb. Being human is a praxis of humanness that does not dwell on the static empiricism of the unfittest and the downtrodden and situate the most

marginalized within the incarcerated colonial categorization of oppression; being human as praxis is, to borrow from Maturana and Varela, “the realization of the living.”⁵

The collection begins with the dialogic text “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations” (cited in this introduction simply as “Conversations”). Building on a discussion and interview that began in 2007, Katherine McKittrick has since spoken and written with Wynter about various aspects of her research and writing. A call-and-response, this piece might be thought of as an extended prologue to the collection: a narrative that sets the stage for the collection’s essays by drawing attention to key themes and concepts in Wynter’s work; and, a prefatory conversation that highlights Wynter’s voice within the context of the collection as a whole. Indeed, the call-and-response is doubled, with Wynter and McKittrick “calling” and “responding” to one another in “Conversations,” while “Conversations” provides a context for the remaining essays that, as a whole, bounce off of, riff toward, and particularize Wynter’s larger project. As it contextualizes the collection as a whole, “Conversations” is also a narrative that extends beyond Wynter’s earlier writings. Completed in early 2014, it begins the collection but might also be read as a text that closes the collection and opens up Wynter’s most recent insights—for it is here that she pushes us to think carefully about the ways in which our capacity to produce narrative as physiological beings allows us to critically re-envision our futures in new and provocative ways.

This is followed by two essays that work through the broader conceptual claims that Sylvia Wynter makes in relation to colonialism, coloniality, history, and the ethics of being human. Denise Ferreira da Silva’s “Before Man: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” is one of the first discussions to think extensively about Wynter’s research alongside that of Michel Foucault. In her essay, Silva traces Wynter’s reading of the ways in which a racial presence is necessary to the expansion, development, and implementation of imperial order and the production of Man-as-human. Here, as in Wynter’s work, Silva puts pressure on Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and tables of difference by drawing attention to the ways in which the violence of conquest and colonization are implicit to modernity. Walter Mignolo’s contribution, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?,” explores the cognitive shifts incited by Copernican and Darwinian epochs in order to address the ways in which Sylvia Wynter’s project itself is situated outside our present order of knowledge. Wynter’s

perspective and therefore her reading practices, he suggests, are *decolonial scientia* in that she situates herself beyond the crass body politics of colonial knowledge in order to foster adjoined human needs. Mignolo's essay traces the ways in which Wynter's unveiling of reality—as a naturalized autopoietic social system—allows her to read particular moments, from C. L. R. James's Marxism and Fanon's sociogeny to 1492 and the rise of scientific reason, anew.

Bench Ansfield's "Still Submerged: The Uninhabitability of Urban Redevelopment," draws on Wynter's insights to think through the ways in which urban recovery projects and urban studies approaches to post-Katrina New Orleans are bound up in a teleological promise that reproduces sites of blackness, poverty, and struggle as perpetually and naturally condemned. Extending Wynter's discussion of "1492: A New World View" and the ceaseless geographic workings of colonialism, Ansfield asks that we recognize the ways in which post-Katrina New Orleans is a location of ongoing politicized struggles that demand a home *life*: antidemolition struggles, the right to return, the right to stay, as practices that are deeply entwined with an ethics of recognizing alternative claims to humanness. Katherine McKittrick's essay, "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," explores the ways in which science and scientific knowledge emerge in the writings of Sylvia Wynter. Looking at the scientific contours of creative labor, the essay concludes with a discussion of Jimi Hendrix, music making, blackness, and scientific-mathematic knowledge to illuminate Wynter's call to envision the human as bios-mythoi and being human as praxis. Nandita Sharma's "Strategic Anti-Essentialism: Decolonizing Decolonization" focuses on the ways in which displaced and migratory communities—populations who are identifiable as "immigrants" rather than "indigenous"—are, through the language and theorizing of "settler colonialism," produced as colonizing subjects. By dwelling on Wynter's discussion of *propter nos*, Sharma suggests that the inequalities produced through colonialism not be conceptualized vis-à-vis the Manichaeian categories of "native" and "nonnative" but rather through the planetary interhuman consequences of 1492 and the resultant shared experience of, and thus resistance to, terror.

Rinaldo Walcott's contribution, "Genres of Human: Multiculturalism, Cosmo-politics, and the Caribbean Basin," reads the Caribbean basin in relation to European modernity. Working with the writings of Sylvia Wynter, Stuart Hall, Edouard Glissant, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Jacques

Derrida, among others, Walcott argues the Caribbean region does not offer an easy unified articulation of sameness through difference but rather a space where the constant negotiation of particularities—extending outward from colonial brutalities—produces an ethics of being “yet to come.” Carole Boyce Davies’s “From Masquerade to *Maskerade*: Caribbean Cultural Resistance and the Rehumanizing Project” invites a complex and unique reading of Wynter’s dramatic play not only because she unearths the intellectual provocations found in practices of creativity—her culling of Wynter’s theoretical-scholarly insights that are embedded in *Maskerade* is meaningful—but also because she suggests that such practices of creativity are, for postslave black/Caribbean communities, ways to imagine and bring forth integrated and soldered human *and* environmental alternatives to the crude mechanics of capitalism that arose from plantation slavery. Indeed, we can notice in the essays by Boyce Davies and Walcott, if read alongside Sharma’s contribution, how Wynter’s work draws attention to the ways in which transatlantic slavery—violent displacement—enforced the necessity of blacks to plant themselves as indigenous to the New World. This kind of insight importantly troubles the politics of claiming land alongside racial particularities and takes what is now being called “settler colonialism studies” in a different direction.

Demetrius Eudell’s essay, “Come on Kid, Let’s Go Get the *Thing*”: The Sociogenic Principle and the *Being* of Being Black/Human,” closes the collection and situates Wynter’s insights within the context of black intellectual history. Eudell’s essay surveys key themes that emerge in Wynter’s writings and across black studies, and underscores how particular thinkers have, either in part or to a large extent, challenged the overrepresentation of Man. Eudell’s essay traces the ways in which black subjects negotiate biocentric racial scripts in relation to their *own inventions* of blackness. The essay uncovers the ways in which Wynter’s insights on sociogeny help clarify the process through which blackness—as we know it—becomes a reality.

Yours in the Intellectual Struggle/The Realization of the Living

Over many, many hours Sylvia Wynter generously shared an analytical story that was insightful, creative, prodigious, urgent. The analytical story put forth both in “Conversations” and in her other works is not simply an intellectual treatise; the ideas uncover a synthesizing mind *at work*. Put differently, throughout and within her essays and ideas, Wynter does not simply convey a set of ideas; rather, she demonstrates the difficult *labor* of thinking

the world anew. Wynter's ideas are, in a sense, invariably verbs, encoded with active thought processes grappling with the magma of far-reaching challenges—including the unresolved/unsolved problem of race—which has come to confront us as a global human species collectively living with, through, and against the West's incorporating expansion. To engage her research and ideas is not, then, to take up a purely discursive text; rather, her work reveals intellectual *life* and struggle, with Wynter bringing into focus the dimensions of human life itself through her intensely provocative intellectual concerns and the correlated practice of cognition: a mind at work/everything is praxis.

The title of this introduction, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living,” is meant to signal how we might read the work of Sylvia Wynter and the essays collected here. Many letters Wynter has posted to me, and others, over the years have closed with the words “yours in the intellectual struggle” and have inspired a world that imagines change.⁶ But the struggle to make change is difficult within our present system of knowledge; the struggle can, and has, reproduced practices that profit from marginalization and thus posit that emancipation involves reaching for the *referent-we* of Man. Thus, “yours in the intellectual struggle” bears witness to the practice of sharing words and letters while also drawing attention to the possibilities that storytelling and wording bring.

Sylvia Wynter's insights, essays, letters, and shared ideas signal that hers is a generous project, one that allows the authors in this collection and elsewhere to draw attention to new stories of being human that challenge the profitable brutalities that attend the realization of Man-as-human.⁷ I suggest that Wynter's closing signature—“yours in the intellectual struggle”—is best conceptualized alongside Maturana and Varela's “the realization of the living.” The latter's research on social systems, the biological sciences, and human activities has long informed Wynter's work and points to her understanding that our present analytic categories—race, class, gender, sexuality, margins and centers, insides and outsides—tell a partial story, wherein humanness continues to be understood in hierarchical terms. The realization of the living, then, is a *relational* act and practice that identifies the contemporary underclass as colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless peoples who are not simply *marked* by social categories but are instead identifiably condemned due to their dysselected *human* status. At the same time, as noted earlier, “the realization of the living” must be imagined as inviting *being human as praxis* into our purview, which envisions the human as

verb, as alterable, as relational, and necessarily dislodges the naturalization of dysselection.

Wynter and the essayists here do not use categories of disenfranchisement as a starting points; rather, they focus on the ways in which such categories work themselves out in relation to the human, being human, human being, and codes that govern humanness. Wynter's outlook thus identifies that humanness might be newly conceptualized as a relational category, what she describes in "Conversations" as bios-mythoi, that is differentially inscribed by a knowledge system that mathematizes the dysselected. This is to say that human life is marked by a racial economy of knowledge that conceals—but does not necessarily expunge—relational possibilities and the New World views of those who construct a reality that is produced outside, or pushing against, the laws of captivity. It follows, according to Wynter, that we would do well to reanimate and thus more fully realize the co-relational poetics-aesthetics of our scientific selves.

Notes

1. Including, it should be noted, the nine-hundred-page unpublished manuscript, *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World*, which is housed at the The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York.
2. Scott, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism," 119–207.
3. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11; Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," 134–146.
4. Scott, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism," 206.
5. Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*.
6. Wynter discusses her signature in Thomas, "ProudFlesh Inter/Views Sylvia Wynter."
7. Thomas, "ProudFlesh Inter/Views Sylvia Wynter"; Bogues, *After Man, towards the Human*; Eudell and Allen, "Sylvia Wynter."

2 UNPARALLELED CATASTROPHE FOR OUR SPECIES?

Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations

Katherine McKittrick: These conversations began in 2007. Since that time, a series of ideas and exchanges have taken place and unfolded into ongoing discussions about humanism, monohumanism, natural scarcity, genetic codes, race, location, and more. This document archives the key ideas that arose through what was originally, in 2007, an “interview” while also assembling, around and through these ideas, the call-and-response conversations between Wynter and McKittrick that have taken place since.¹ The call-and-response has been textual, telephonic, computerized, and musical—with one document repurposing and mashing up the breaking of the levees and geographies of the Ninth Ward with the 2007 “interview” archives, Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, the Detroit electronica band Drexciya, and others.² The narratives here, though, in text form, are conversations that draw specific attention to Sylvia Wynter’s ongoing concerns about the ways in which the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a *genre* of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systemically excise the world’s most marginalized. Here, her comprehensive knowledge of arts, letters, history, geography, science, and nature comes together—in relation to different times and spaces—and provides a meaningful pathway to dwell on what means to be human and, more important, how we might give humanness a different future.

This conversation should be read with Wynter’s earlier work in mind. Her writings on the overrepresentation of Man and her conceptualization of Man₁ and Man₂, which are explored throughout her writings and in the essays collected here, inform much of what is put forth below.³ The human,

in Wynter's writings, is representatively linked to the figure of Man₁ (invented by the Renaissance's *studia humanitatis* as *homo politicus* and therefore differentiated but not wholly separate from the *homo religiosus* conception of human) that was tethered to the theological order of knowledge of pre-Renaissance Latin-Christian medieval Europe; this figure opened up a slot for Man₂, a figure based on the Western bourgeoisie's model of being human that has been articulated as, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal monohumanism's *homo oeconomicus*.⁴ These figures, both Man₁ and Man₂, are also inflected by powerful knowledge systems and origin stories that explain who/what we are. These systems and stories produce the lived and racialized categories of the rational and irrational, the selected and the dysselected, the haves and the have-nots as asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual human groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood yet signal the processes through which the empirical and experiential lives of *all* humans are increasingly subordinated to a figure that thrives on accumulation.

Added to this, Wynter thinks about the neurological responses that such figures induce: with our biblical and Darwinian origin stories in mind, she locates how the human remains beholden to these pervasive knowledge systems. Thus our postbiblical origin stories might also be described as *macro-origin* stories—as they are tightly knitted to the figures of Man₁ and Man₂ and consequently function to semantically activate the endogenous opiate reward-and-punishment system of the human brain.⁵ The paradoxical way in which *race*—as the naturalized and secular organizing principle of those global relations that are wedded to the Darwinian/Malthusian macro-origin stories that iterate and normalize *homo oeconomicus*—will continue, too, to cast an apocalyptic shadow on any possibility of our thereby *just*, existence as a species. We presently live in a moment where the human is understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well-being/ill-being—a script, therefore, whose macro-origin story calcifies the *hero figure* of *homo oeconomicus* who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom. Capital is thus projected as the indispensable, empirical, and metaphysical source of all human life, thus semantically activating the neurochemistry of our brain's opiate reward/punishment system to act accordingly!

Sylvia Wynter offers a different origin narrative possibility. Extending Frantz Fanon's new descriptive statement, which redefines our being hu-

man in both meta-Freudian and meta-Darwinian terms, she offers an ecumenically human (origin) story. Specifically, she works through the ways in which Fanon's concept of sociogeny (our codes or masks or *mythoi* or origin narratives) is *linked in semantically activating causal terms*, with the *bios* phenomena of phylogeny / ontogeny.⁶ Our *mythoi*, our origin stories, are therefore always formulaically patterned so as to co-function with the endogenous neurochemical behavior regulatory system of our human brain. Humans are, then, a biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—*storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological*. With this, particular (presently biocentric) macro-origin stories are overrepresented as the singular narrative through which the stakes of human freedom are articulated and marked.⁷ Our contemporary moment thus demands a normalized origin narrative of survival-through-ever-increasing-processes-of-consumption-and-accumulation. This is reinforced by the epistemological elaboration of a story line—here we should be mindful of the disciplinary discourses of natural scarcity, the bell curve, and so forth, together with the “planet of slums” reality that is before us—which is nevertheless *made to appear, in commonsense terms*, as being *naturally* determined.⁸ This commonsense naturalized story is cast as the only *possible* realization of the way the world must be, and “is.”

Working alongside W. E. B. DuBois, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Elsa Goveia, among others, Wynter dedicates her own past and still ongoing work to the furthering of the “gaze from below” emancipatory legacy. This legacy had been born out of the overall global range of anticolonial and antiapartheid struggles against the overtly imperial and colonial liberal monohumanist premises. Those struggles were to eventually fail; *politically independent* nation-states came to be epistemologically co-opted and globally reincorporated into the Western world system—a system that is now in its postcolonial, postapartheid but still liberal (or now neoliberal) monohumanist symbolically encoded configuration. Because her ongoing work still strives, as her earlier work had done, to fully realize that emancipatory legacy by putting forward an alternative, *yet no less secular*, version of humanness imagined outside liberal monohumanism, her overall project can be identified as that of a *counterhumanism*—one now ecumenically “made to the measure of the world.”⁹

Some preparatory remarks on the document that follows: The discussion is framed by four guide quotes, which, ideally, the reader will keep in mind throughout. The guide quotes are followed by the larger textual

document—the conversations. The conversations are divided into sections that the reader can study in order, out of order, separately, or all together. Each section includes a heading and a very short preamble by McKittrick, which leads into the subsequent insights by Wynter. The entire document reflects the questions from the original 2007 conversation, parts of that conversation that have not been reproduced, verbatim, here, and the call-and-response pattern mentioned above. This is to say that the headings, preambles, and insights are anchored to Wynter’s ideas and were generated through what I can only describe as a broader conversational praxis. The endnotes—in the spirit of Wynter and others—draw attention to those areas of the conversations that have been omitted in the text but are relevant to thematic concerns and, perhaps more important, will encourage further explorations of narratives that think through and across humanness, location, and knowledge.¹⁰

Guide Quotes

We know that when we talk about the processes of civilization, or evaluate human behavior, human organization, or any biological system, *we are concerned with self-corrective systems*. Basically these systems are always *conservative* of something. As in the engine with a governor, the fuel supply is changed to conserve—to keep constant—the speed of the flywheel, so always in such systems changes occur to conserve the truth of some descriptive statement, some component of the *status quo* . . . fundamentally, we deal with three of these enormously complex systems or arrangements of conservative loops. One is the human individual. Its physiology and neurology conserve body temperature, blood chemistry, the length and size and shape of organs during growth and embryology, and all the rest of the body’s characteristics. This is a system which conserves descriptive statements about the human being, body or soul. For the same is true of the psychology of the individual, *where learning occurs to conserve the opinions and components of the status quo*. . . . Second, we deal with the society in which that individual lives—and that society is again a system of the same general kind. . . . And third, we deal with the ecosystem, the natural biological surroundings of these human animals.

—Gregory Bateson, “Conscious Purpose versus Nature” (emphasis added)¹¹

How was *Homo oeconomicus* foisted on us? In spite of his elegant foreign name, he is selfish and unmannered, *brutish as Caliban, naïve as Man Friday*. We all love to speak scathingly of him. Judging from the bad press he receives, we actually

dislike him a lot and cannot believe anyone *could really be so greedy and selfish. He is logical*, but even that is unattractive. His shadow stretches across our thoughts so effectively that *we even use his language for criticizing him*. . . . Our subject is about his origins: *Where did someone without social attributes come from in the first place*, and why has he expanded from a small, theoretical niche to become an all-embracing mythological figure . . . like a *republican parallel to the imperial microcosm of former civilizations*?

—Mary Douglas and Steven Ney, *Missing Persons* (emphasis added)

What if we did not know where we are and who we are? What if all previous answers to the question of who we are were merely based upon the application of an answer given long ago, an answer that does not correspond to what is perhaps asked in the question *now touched upon of who we are*? For we do not now ask about ourselves “as human,” assuming we understand this name in its traditional meaning. According to this meaning, man is a kind of “organism” (animal), that exists among others on the inhabited earth and in the universe. We know this organism, *especially since we ourselves are of this type*. There is a whole contingent of “sciences” that give information about this organism—named man—and we collect them together under the name “anthropology.”

—Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts* (emphasis added)

What is by common consent called the human sciences have their own drama. . . . All these discoveries, all these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other “animals.” . . . This amounts to nothing more nor less than man’s surrender. . . . Having reflected on that, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere [biological] mechanism. . . . And truly what is to be done is to set man free.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Toward the Counterauthority of a New Science in the Global Context of Our Contemporary Crisis-Ridden Times

Katherine McKittrick: In the following, Wynter sets out her project, delineating the ways in which the Copernican leap was to be iconic of the Renaissance transformative mutation. She outlines how the redefinition of the meaning of being human during this epoch, within the overall context of a *studia humanitatis* order of knowledge, was being effected, for the first time, in implicitly desupernaturalizing terms. The premise of this counterpoetics,

initially realized by Copernicus's new astronomy, later came to be developed as the physical sciences together with their uniquely new self-correcting mode of cognition. This was followed by a redefined purely secular liberal monohumanist figure that enacts, presently, the hegemonically bourgeois *homo oeconomicus* "descriptive statement" of being human: *pari passu* with the rise and development from the late nineteenth century onward of the Darwinian/neo-Darwinian biological sciences that now underwrite our contemporary epistemological order.¹²

Sylvia Wynter: What I'm going to propose is that we are now challenged with envisioning a new "science of the Word," which I take from Aimé Césaire.¹³ This challenge can be likened to that made by Copernicus when he declared that, while it may *seem* absurd, the Earth indeed also moves! Then Galileo tried to support this view, and he was imprisoned by the Inquisition and had to recant specifically that the Earth indeed does not move. Yet of course, the Earth *does* move. Yet, the premise that the Earth did not move was very central to the form of Christian theology that was hegemonic at the time. Thus, as the famous Cardinal Bellarmine—in the later context of Galileo's heresy trial for his defense of Copernicus's thesis—said: if the Earth moves, it would vitiate our entire plan of salvation.¹⁴ Thus the context of that history demonstrates that, within that theologically absolute system of knowledge, the Earth was supposed to be *fixed* at the center of the universe, as the divinely condemned abode of post-Adamic fallen man. Now, many bourgeois scholars keep saying: Oh, Copernicus took man away from the center, thereby *devalorizing* the human. But they are liberal scholars, right? They see the world *biocentrically*. And they do not understand that, seen *theocentrically*—as would have been the case then—to *be at the center was to be at the dregs of the universe*. The center was then the *most degraded* place to be! So when Copernicus says that the Earth also moves, he is *re-valorizing* the Earth. With his challenge, what now has to be recognized is that since the Earth also moves, *and is therefore a star like any other*, it also has to be, over against the traditional astronomy, *of the same homogeneous physical substance as the heavenly bodies*! But he's *also* changing the center to the Sun—and instead of the center being a degraded place, it's now an exalted place.¹⁵ So unless we move out of the liberal monohumanist mind-set, it's very difficult to see where we've been, where we're going. Once the Earth had been proved to move, medieval Latin-Christian Europe's then hegemonic theologically absolute worldview had begun to come to an end.

Let us say if you were a Christian subject—now you and I, we don't feel the Earth to move, right? But we take it for granted that the natural scientists are right when they tell us it moves. But for those inhabiting the medieval order of Copernicus's time, when they didn't feel the Earth to move, they would say: ah, I am sinful because Adam and Eve fell and this Earth, divinely condemned to be nonmoving, is justly my abode. If the Earth moved, the theo-Scholastic order of knowledge would have to go. It disappeared.

Copernicus's proposed new astronomy fundamentally breached what was, at that time, the still hegemonic and theologically absolute Scholastic order of knowledge. At the same time, the lay or largely secular scholars—the humanists—projected *studia humanitatis*, which had also come to counterpose itself against that of the theologically absolute order of knowledge together with the overall vertically caste-stratified hierarchical order of medieval Latin-Christian Europe; this was a legitimated order of knowledge wherein a vertically hierarchical order was dominated *spiritually* and *epistemologically* by the church and its celibate clergy. Thus, as an imperative function of the above, *before* the challenge of Copernicus's new astronomy, the hierarchies of the order of late Latin-Christian medieval Europe, the latter in both its spiritual (i.e., sexually celibate) and profane (i.e., sexually non-celibate) clergy/laity forms, had anchored itself on, inter alia, an orthodox Ptolemaic astronomy, for which the cosmos had continued to be defined by a projected fundamental (Heaven/Earth) divide. While this millennially held tradition of knowing the macrocosmos and, co-relatedly, the role allocations of the respective microcosmoi of all societal orders in analogically reinforcing or *mirroring* terms, had logically led, at its Ptolemaic best, to a technically proficient yet at the same time epistemologically resigned astronomy.¹⁶ An astronomy and ordering that, although theologically elaborated in then Latin Christianity's monotheistic Heaven/Earth divide terms, had hitherto remained unchallengeable, reaching all the way back as it did, to Greek astronomy (and there evidencing, if philosophically elaborated, the no less fundamental macrocosmic Form/Matter divide).

Copernicus's epochal breaching of the Heaven/Earth divide was only to be made possible during the Renaissance, first, in generic terms, by the revalorizing/reinvention of Latin-Christian medieval Europe's *homo religiosus Adamic fallen Man* as *homo politicus*, a figure now self-governed by its/his reason, articulated as reasons of state. This was a newly invented Renaissance humanist counterpoetics that was projected over and against the Absolute and conceptually all-powerful, *uncaring* and arbitrary God of the

church's then late-medieval orthodox theology. In the terms of the latter's counterpoetics, therefore, the relation was now renarrated as one between the traditional biblical Christian God and a mankind *for whose sake* (*propter nos homines*), rather than merely *for the sake* of his own glory (as the then nominalist orthodox theology held), he had indeed *created the Universe*.¹⁷ And he, as Copernicus was to centrally argue, as "the best and most systematic artisan of all," would *have had to have created* the universe's "world machine" according to rules that made it *law-likely* knowable by the human reason of those creatures *for whose sake* he had done so.¹⁸

The result was that Copernicus's new (1543) astronomy would, over several centuries and with further development by other scholars, come to be fully realized as a uniquely new and *cognitively open*—because, normally, *imperatively self-correcting*—order of knowledge, just as that of the physical sciences. That premise was therefore to also open up a generalized *natural scientific* conceptual space. This conceptual space provided a context for the biological sciences of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to become increasingly institutionalized. This conceptual space, then, was therefore to make possible Darwin's epistemological rupture or leap—that is, its far-reaching challenge to Christianity's biblical macro-origin story's theocosmogonically projected divinely created divide between an ostensibly generically Christian mankind, on the one hand, and all other species, on the other. These natural (biological) sciences, however—as they too function, for the main part, in cognitively open and self-correcting terms—must be taken into account with the aporia of their now globally hegemonic Janus-faced *purely biocentric* version of humanness.

The Renaissance humanist mutation and resulting eventual disappearance of the theo-Scholastic order of knowledge reveal that our own now purely secular and purely biocentric order of knowledge can also cease to exist; we see an analogical challenge to that advanced by Copernicus when he challenged the order of knowledge of his time. What I'm putting forward as a challenge here, as a wager, is therefore that the human is, meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos* (or, as I have recently come to redefine it, *bios* and *mythoi*). Or, as Fanon says, phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny, *together, define what it is to be human*. With this hypothesis, should it prove to be true, our system of knowledge as we have it *now*, goes. Because our present system of knowledge is based on the premise that the human is, like all purely biological species, a natural organism; or, the human is defined biocentrically and therefore exists, as such, in a relationship