



Sylvia Wynter

INTERVIEW

# The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter

David Scott

[A]t the very time when it most often mouths the word, the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world.

– Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

## PREFACE

The story of humanism (whether as a philosophical doctrine or as a worldly orientation) is often told as a kind of European coming-of-age story. On this account, humanism marks a certain stage in Europe's consciousness of itself – that stage at which it leaves behind it the cramped intolerances of the damp and enclosed Middle Ages and enters, finally, into the rational spaciousness and secular luminosity of the Modern. As such, it forms a central, even defining, chapter in Europe's liberal autobiography. But that coming-of-age story has another aspect or dimension that is often relegated to a footnote, namely the connection between humanism and dehumanization. For this Renaissance moment of the birth of humanism (I am leaving aside, for my purposes here, the narrative of its classical and Christian

antecedents) is simultaneously the moment of initiation of Europe's colonial project. Humanism and colonialism inhabit the same cognitive-political universe inasmuch as Europe's discovery of its Self is simultaneous with its discovery of its Others.

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In the middle of the twentieth century, however, that footnote was in the process of a noisy assault on Europe's idea of itself as synonymous with humanism. The anticolonial movement had initiated a radical critique of the heart of European self-consciousness by demonstrating just how deeply its celebrated concept of Man depended upon the systematic degradation of non-European men and women. This, of course, was nowhere more brilliantly articulated than in Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>1</sup> The systemic objectification and violence of colonialism gave the lie to Europe's humanism. As Fanon put it in the closing pages of his anticolonial manifesto: "When I search for Man in the technique and style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders".<sup>2</sup> But what bears reflection is that neither Fanon nor Césaire want to abandon humanism. On the contrary, they want to correct its vision and fulfil its promise. This is why, as Fanon goes on to announce, the aim of the postcolonial project is "to try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth".<sup>3</sup>

The anticolonial assault, then, is one fundamental moment in the dissolution of Europe's idea of itself as the embodiment of humanity's ideal. It is interesting that Jean-Paul Sartre recognizes this in his famous preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (published, remember, within a year of his own *Critique of Dialectical Reason*). It is interesting because another moment in the dissolution of Europe's idea of itself as a source of foundational knowledges is in part directed precisely *against* Sartre – against Sartre in particular, but also against the larger emancipationist humanism of which his existential Marxism was an influential instance. This is the emergence of an antihumanism – namely, structuralism, with its infamous idea of a subjectless history – that turns its attention against the historicist-phenomenological recuperation of Hegel. In many ways, of course, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* is the paradigmatic instance of this antihumanism in its critical mode.<sup>4</sup> In recasting the

1 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955; reprint, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1968).

2 Fanon, *The Wretched*, 312.

3 *Ibid.*, 313.

4 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973).

history of Europe as a history of mutations of *episteme* (that is, cognitive orders that determine the rules of formation of concepts, theories, objects of study and the like), it seriously undermined the conceit of Europe's Reason as the progressive unfolding of the consciousness of a singular subject.

It is in this unevenly overlapping space where the agonistic humanism of Fanon's anticolonialism crosses – without cancelling – the embattled antihumanism of Foucault's archaeological critique, that I would like to locate the work of Sylvia Wynter. A partial location, needless to say, since no single set of coordinates can exhaustively situate an aesthetic-intellectual career as full and plural as that of Wynter. But across the many disjunctures around which it coheres as the work of an exemplary life there is the persistence of an aspiration to a certain ideal of humanism – a dissonant, a non-identitarian, but nonetheless a comprehensive and planetary humanism.

Wynter's work is distinctive in many ways – for its extraordinary range of literary, philosophical and historical reference, for example. But perhaps one of the more striking features of her work is its *foundational* character, its restless quest for the most interconnected and totalizing ground on which to secure the humanist ideal to which she aspires. For Wynter, the hope of a revised humanism depends not merely on the perspectivalism of the deconstructive gesture (the critique of the false or partial humanisms that have so far ordered emancipationist projects). It depends also, dialectically, on a reconstructed understanding of the grounds of human being, a reconstruction that entails a deeper grasp of the dimensions of human cognition and human action. In this, of course, she runs against the grain of much in contemporary cultural-critical work. Wynter seeks to restore to our conceptualization of human life the framework of a direction, a *telos*. But she wants to do this while evading a vulgar metaphysical essentialism – which is why the register of discourse has the significance it has for her. For while she is concerned to anchor the human and its projects in its material (social and bodily) conditions, her concern is to track the “codes” and “genres” in terms of which the understanding (including self-understanding) is constituted. It is not the body's materiality itself that interests her so much as the ideological hegemonies – race principal among them – that come to be imprinted on it in such a way that we live their inscriptions as the historically varying modes of our truth.

In Wynter the density is all. The scale and ambition of the project is as vast as it is complex. And whether or not you agree in full with its terms, whether or not in the end you are persuaded by the distinctive reading of history on which it depends, and

whether or not you share the epistemological assumptions that ground and guide it, it is impossible *not* to be deeply inspired – even awed – by the renewal of the vision of the human that Sylvia Wynter offers to us. It is a vision of humanism made to the measure of the world.<sup>5</sup>

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Born in Cuba of Jamaican parents in 1928, Sylvia Wynter is professor emerita in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Department of Afro-American Studies at Stanford University, Palo Alto, where she taught between 1977 and 1997. She has held appointments at the University of the West Indies, Mona, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the University of California, San Diego. A Caribbean intellectual of surpassing originality and brilliance, she is the author of a novel, *The Hills of Hebron* (1962), several plays (including the 1970 pantomime, *Rockstone Anancy*), and an impressive number of cultural-critical essays most of which are referred to in the footnotes below.

5 For a very different appreciation of Wynter than the one offered here see Paget Henry, "Sylvia Wynter: Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Thought", in his *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

## THE INTERVIEW

### THE COMING OF SOVEREIGNTY

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Scott

**David Scott:** Sylvia, I want to begin with the 1950s, and the early 1960s and with your generation's vision of, or anxiety about, the coming sovereignty. But before I get there, let's start with a few biographical details. You were born in Cuba, but you grew up in Jamaica. What took your parents to Cuba?

**Sylvia Wynter:** They went there in search of work. There had been an explosion of the sugar industry in Cuba. Quite a lot of Jamaicans went. They were part of that whole exodus at that time.

**DS:** But your childhood is spent in Jamaica.

**SW:** Yes, I came back as a baby.

**DS:** Where in Jamaica did you grow up?

**SW:** Well, I lived in Kingston. We were very poor, and we lived on Pound Road, what is now Maxwell Avenue.

**DS:** What general area of Kingston is that?

**SW:** Right in what is now the ghetto. Later we would move to East Kingston, then to Brentford Road at Cross Roads where I spent my adolescence. But as a young child, I remember walking to school along Spanish Town Road to a school called Ebenezer School. It was a Methodist school attached to a church. The school, I am told, is no longer there. It used to be at the corner of Spanish Town Road and Darling Street.

So we went to this Ebenezer Elementary School. Our school had an excellent schoolmaster. He actually had books. There were not very many books, but he had them on some shelves. So we were able to read. I remember him very well. His modus operandi was to go around hitting all of us with a cane whether we had done anything or not. To wake up our minds, he said! But he was an excellent teacher. I remember him as belonging to a magnificent generation of schoolmasters. Today you wouldn't get them in the schools because they'd be in politics or in law and so on. But we had the advantage of being taught by these kinds of teachers. This was the only outlet for them then. What was very inspiring was that they saw your triumph as theirs. So we were very lucky in terms of that early schooling, when we lived in the town. But we also lived in the country because both of my grandparents were sort of what you

would call *kulak* peasants, that is, they had a sufficiency of land. So we would spend a lot of our holidays down in the country. *The Hills of Hebron* is actually written out of that, because that memory has been a very powerful one for me in that it was a self-contained peasant world. It was based on what N.W. Manley once described as “the infinite charity of the poor”.

So if I went down to the country with, let us say, eight dresses, by the time I came back, I came back with two. My grandmother would have given the other six to the group of poorer children whom she had informally adopted. I remember we all slept together, stacked horizontally on a large four-poster bed. Even today, the memory of that gives me a sense of grounding in an existential sense of justice, not as grim retribution but as shared happiness.

DS: Is Hector your only sibling?<sup>6</sup>

SW: No, I have a sister, Etta, and a brother, a younger brother, Basil. He is now in New York and she went to England and became a nurse. She retired and returned to Jamaica.<sup>7</sup>

DS: Where did you go to high school?

SW: After elementary school I won a scholarship and went to St Andrew High School. But you see, except for that scholarship, I would not have gone to St Andrew High School. And I think one of the things that has impelled my sense of social justice was my recognizing how that school would make it possible for all my life-interests to be awakened. But had I not gotten a scholarship, I wouldn't have had that opportunity. How scarce such opportunities were! How accidental one's life was! And it was not very different for most Jamaicans. You have very many more opportunities today – although it's still limited. In *those* days you had very, very few.

DS: So you grew up in Jamaica in the 1940s. And you're at St Andrew High in the middle to late 1940s.

SW: Yes, and what is beginning to happen is the anticolonial struggle, a wave of social protest movements with marches of the jobless on the streets, strikes on the sugar plantations, in the city, the asylum catching fire, inmates dying, charges and

6 Hector Wynter (b. 1926), a Jamaican Rhodes scholar, has had a distinguished career as a teacher, university administrator, ambassador, minister of education in the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) government and editor of the *Gleaner*.

7 Not long after this interview, her sister, Mrs Etta Rowe (b. 1929), died unexpectedly, after a brief illness.

countercharges, and so on.<sup>8</sup> But the point to note, one I wish I could properly convey, is that up to then we had been a totally governed and administered people. You cannot imagine today how *total* a system colonialism was! I still remember the image of the British governor's plumed helmet, his white suit, his military entourage, the flag of the British Empire and so on. The whole ceremonial panoply of it! How could it ever have occurred to you then, before the struggles erupted, that you as a "native" subject could take any action on your own?

DS: The emerging movement provided another space, a counter-space.

SW: Yes. It was as if you were suddenly in a different dimension. All at once, here were people, Jamaicans, whether for good or evil, acting and counteracting, challenging the government. Then this extraordinary figure of [Alexander] Bustamante, like some hero out of myth, challenging Governor [Edward] Denham, crying out "Denham must go!" – then Denham taking sick, and, of course, the rumour that this was because Busta had [worked] obeah on him!<sup>9</sup> All in all, the whole sense of activity, of a self-initiated new beginning – I would say that movement determined everything I was going to be or have been. Day after day, one was seeing people on the streets, just ordinary people on the streets, challenging a system day after day. You're getting the news, I can't remember if we had the radio, I think we had, but you were seeing the headlines in the newspaper the next day. You're riding to school on your bicycle and people are marching and countermarching, the asylum is on fire, and all kinds of things are happening, strikes breaking out, pitched battles between rival trade unions, parties erupting, the colonial state under siege.

DS: You mentioned earlier that you knew Richard Hart in the 1940s.<sup>10</sup>

SW: I can't say I remember him exactly, but I remember the influence that he had on us, his impact on us. Here was somebody who came not just from the upper middle

8 The reference here is to the marches of the Kingston unemployed demanding work, as well as to clashes between rival trade unions and the two incipient political parties. During a strike of nurses and general helpers at the mental hospital in February 1946, the buildings caught fire. Some fifteen inmates died in the blaze. For some details, see Trevor Munroe, *The Politics of Constitutional Decolonization: Jamaica, 1944–62* (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1972), 57; and George Eaton, *Alexander Bustamante and Modern Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Kingston Publishers, 1975), 117–20.

9 Sir Edward Denham was colonial governor of Jamaica from 1934 until his death there in June 1938. See, usefully, James Carnegie, *Some Aspects of Jamaica's Politics, 1918–1938* (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1973), 54–58.

10 On Richard Hart, see David Scott, "Memories of the Left: An Interview with Richard Hart", *Small Axe* 3 (March 1998): 65–114.



class, but from the racially dominant white elite stratum. And here he had formed this Jamaica Youth Movement and he caught us up in it.<sup>11</sup> Yet the memory that I have of him has nothing to do with Marxism. Very few of us of my age group even knew who Marx was! I remember him as a very good human being, the example that he set, by reminding you that your life would be meaningless if you were not part of whatever it was that could lead to a just society, simply because a just society is so much easier to live in. That impact was very important, both for myself and for my brother Hector. Both of us were affected, imbued with a sense of service and duty rather than specifically by his Marxist views. I would come to these much later, in London.

DS: Sylvia, do you think that this sense of anticipation, almost euphoric anticipation from the way you describe it, was shared by a lot of students of your generation in Jamaica in the 1940s?

SW: Very much so. It couldn't *not* have been, because we were so impacted upon by the mass movement. The mass movement is taking place every day in the town, we're here, all caught up in it. So it's not like now, when one would have to sit down and make a conscious decision to say, "I'm going to do this." Rather, you were *carried* by a movement something like that in America in the sixties, the black and other movements which had begun earlier with the bus boycott, in Montgomery, Alabama. I have found that some of my US students have been marked forever because they were part of it, as it was happening all around them. They were never to be the same again. And so it was with those of us who had been caught up in the anticolonial struggle.

DS: You leave for London when?

SW: I left in 1947.

DS: And you attend the University of London, Kings' College, I believe. What did you read?

SW: Modern languages.

DS: Why?

SW: Exactly! How did I come to do that? The prescriptive thing then was, of course, if you had the chance, to become a doctor or a lawyer. Well, I had no sort of ability to

<sup>11</sup> On the Jamaica Youth Movement, see Richard Harr, *Towards Decolonization: Political, Labour, and Economic Developments in Jamaica, 1938-1945* (Kingston: Canoe Press, 1999), 129, 169.

be a doctor, so the idea at first was that I was going to be a lawyer. But what happened and how I actually even came to get the scholarship (because I have never really been one of these bright people in the sense of taking exams) was that I read a lot. Several people remember me reading as I walked along the streets, losing my hair ribbons, reading on buses, and so on. I read so much that that gave me a bit of an edge. In the end I got the Jamaican Centenary scholarship, which was a scholarship that was set up in 1938 to commemorate the centenary of emancipation. It was restricted to people who had gone to elementary school. It was therefore a form of affirmative action long before affirmative action. The idea was that if you had gone to elementary school, you could never really compete with the students who had gone to preparatory schools.

But how I came to get this scholarship was this: there was a young teacher just down from Cambridge called Bruce Wardropper. He had come out to Jamaica because he was a conscientious objector to World War II. He came out to teach instead in the colonies. At that time, a form of new criticism and its close reading of texts was very much the vogue.<sup>12</sup> And as you know, in Jamaica all we had in terms of prose was the Bible and the *Daily Gleaner*. And so I remember how he had to work on my prose. But above all, he taught me how to approach a text. Take, for example, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The close reading approach that Wardropper taught me enabled me to see how several major themes which structured the play, as well as its politics, are enacted by the work of a specific system of configuration, of imagery. It enabled me to see what texts *do*! The bonus was that I had the good fortune to have him teach me for my higher school exams. At that time, there was no one at my school, St Andrew High School, who taught Spanish literature at that higher schools exam level. Wardropper, who had taught my brother Hector at Wolmer's Boys School, examined me for the oral exam at Senior Cambridge level. So he said to me after the exam, "Why don't you come down to Wolmer's, join the class there, and I'll teach you?" So I studied with him. Now, his specialty was the literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. Because I did very well on this subject in my higher schools exam, he advised me to major in Romance languages. He warned me against being a lawyer.

12 On the New Criticism see, usefully, Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Bruce Wardropper was to later become a distinguished professor of Romance literatures at Duke University.

By the way, I did go and see Norman Manley seeking his advice also. Remember, my family at that time was very much a part of the PNP [People's National Party] – at that time everyone, all of us who were socially aspiring to middle-class intelligentsia status, saw ourselves as a part of the PNP. So I went to see him, and he too warned me against it. He said, “Don't do law, because although it can look so wonderful when you see trials in the courts and so on, it might be stultifying for you.” I'm very, very grateful [for that advice].

DS: You mean, *intellectually* stultifying?

SW: Yes. So I went and I did modern languages, Spanish and an English minor, at London University.

DS: At that time, what did you have in mind doing with that?

SW: At that time I don't know exactly. I remember Bruce Wardropper saying, “With that kind of degree you can turn your hand to anything. You could be a journalist, you might want to be a writer. Or you might want to consider teaching.” But I hadn't actually thought about teaching, at that time. Then when I went to London there was a group from Trinidad led by Boscoe Holder.<sup>13</sup> Of course, we all wanted to be a part of his dance troupe, because at that time everything Caribbean was still new, still to be done. I think Elsa Goveia was the one who put it accurately when she said that it was only in the context of the anticolonial movement that all of a sudden writers began writing, painters began painting, that people who had been silent for so long now “found their voices”. So I suppose we wanted to do something. You must realize that this transformation was not only political, it was also going to be in the arts. For example, people began writing poetry. I have a fearful memory of myself having to recite a poem that was written by George Campbell, and asking, “Is my skin beautiful?” and so on.<sup>14</sup> And all the schoolboys shouting from the back, “No!” Nevertheless, this gives some idea of the excitement of the way in which everybody was revaluing everything, literally transvaluing value in Nietzsche's sense. One example: In school, we were being taught in the terms of British imperial history that

<sup>13</sup> Born in Trinidad in the early 1920s, Boscoe Holder is a multi-talented artist – pianist, painter, dancer and choreographer. When he moved to London in 1950 he formed a dance troupe, Boscoe Holder and his Caribbean Dancers, which toured Europe. See Geoffrey MacLean, *Boscoe Holder: (Poet of Spain)*, Trinidad: MacLean Publishing, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Edna Manley has referred to George Campbell as the “leading poet of the 1938 revolution” (see her lovingly peened preface to Dennis Scott, *Uncle Time* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973], xiv). Campbell's *First Poems* appeared in 1945.

two nineteenth-century Jamaican rebels, Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, were traitors.<sup>15</sup> Now, suddenly, we had to begin to see them in an entirely different light, because of our new self-conception as Jamaicans, our new imaging of ourselves as a nation.

DS: Many West Indians in London in those years speak not only of the exhilaration of that experience but, in particular, of the emerging sense of *West Indianness*. Is this also your experience?

SW: Very true, because, remember, in the different islands we had been totally cut off from each other. We weren't even taught Caribbean geography in the schools. The geography that was taught was that of England, the history that was taught was English history. We weren't even taught the geography of the United States. At that time the United States was considered a second-rate country. London was the centre of empire and the British Empire was still very powerful. So we met Trinidadians there, and the Trinidadians brought calypso, and I remember one Christmas dancing out into the snow in a low-cut dress and ending up with pneumonia. It was wonderful, this sense. But it wasn't only about being West Indian. There were many Africans there, all of them struggling for independence, so there was a powerful pan-African sensibility. And not just a pan-African sensibility either. There was a diverse group of colonial students, including students from India, so there was also a feeling of what would later be called Third Worldness. So there was a ferment at that centre, because these are going to be the days that will see the climax of the definitive struggles against the British Empire.

DS: In London you are not only in the middle of numbers of people from other parts of the West Indies and people from Africa, but also in the middle of a kind of Caribbean intellectual upheaval. Are you yourself hooked into a circuit of Caribbean writers and scholars?

SW: As a student I think I was more hooked into the dancers. I was a part of Boscoe Holder's dance troupe. My central interest there was in the dancing and that was far more my world. It would be only after I had finished my degree and then left England, got married, and come back in about 1957, '58, that I became connected to writers and writing. I had also been living in Europe where I had been trying out for

15 On Bogle and Gordon see Gad Heuman, *'The Killing Time': The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

film parts, but I could never get a part for myself. Either I was not black enough, or sometimes Americans would put make-up on you and transform you into this or that. For example, I was one of Pharaoh's concubines in the film *The Land of the Pharaohs!* So I started to write parts for myself. Then I found I was more interested in the writing rather than in the parts themselves.

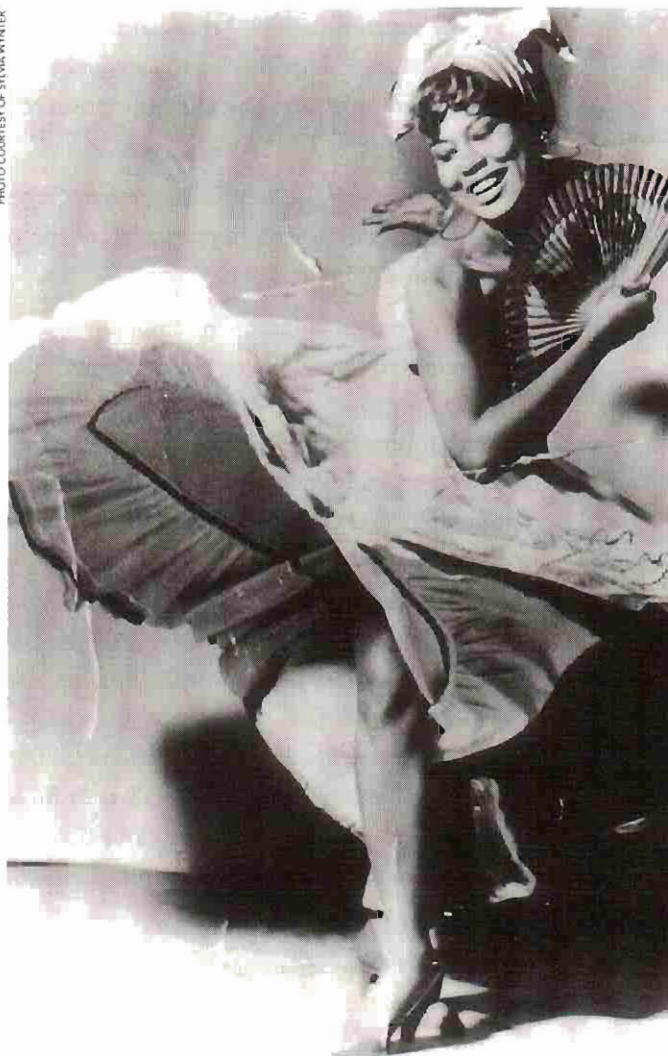
DS: So you had a sense of yourself not only as a dancer but as an actress as well.

SW: I was going to be an actress, and I was going to be a singer. That was my big dream at that time. I was going to be a singer, but I hadn't thought of myself as a writer. For some reason, I don't know why, the idea of the dance at that time was so powerful because I think it bridged the divide in the Caribbean between the literate written tradition and the stigmatized yet powerful undertow of African religions and their cultural seedbed that had transformed itself into a current that was now neoindigenous to the Caribbean. And this was what was being resurrected.

DS: Are you conscious of that at that moment?

SW: At *that* moment? No. At that moment, that was simply what seemed to be the thing you had to do. You understand what I mean? There was then, like the flowering, the expression of what it was to be this new thing: a Jamaican, a West Indian. You must remember that, as Walcott says so beautifully, going to school we had lived in a world of the imagination whose landscape was filled with enchanted

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYLVIA WYNTER



Sylvia Wynter, Rome, 1950s

daffodils. For example, the first stories that I wrote were set in England, in London. I had never been in London. I am still very proud, nevertheless, about one set in Yorkshire, whose heroine was a Luddite. For some reason I had an identification with English working-class struggles. And this is where I had begun to experience a parallel sensibility to that of all subordinated groups. You see, there can be a *transfer of empathy* because of your ability to experience yourself in that way. Now, remember, no story is going to be set in Jamaica, because I've never been taught anything about the history of Jamaica. If I heard about the Paul Bogle 1865 rebellion, it was about these traitors against the British Empire. And I don't think that it was just ideology. Rather, it was the conception of being a British subject. To be a British subject, naturally you would see Bogle and Gordon as conspiring against that which made you a British subject. So all your education was intended to constitute you as a British subject, but I don't think it was a deliberate plot. This was simply how the English saw themselves. And this is how they would make their native colonial subjects see themselves – derivatively. As long as there is not a counter-voice, we too are trapped in that conception. What happens now, after this great erupting moment, is that suddenly [you] begin to constitute yourself as another subject.

DS: So there is in the 1950s, for your generation in London, a very self-conscious concern to transform the imagination.

SW: Very self-conscious. Certainly by the time I became a writer it becomes very self-conscious. Remember, going to England, or coming to the United States, what you run into is the overt nature of these stereotypes of yourself that confront you. It's like Fanon going to France and hearing, "Mama, look, a nigger!" Now, in Martinique, his French colonial island, his mother had warned him, "Don't be a nigger."<sup>16</sup> But it had never occurred to him that he himself was a nigger. Since you could *behave* in such a way as to prove you're *not* a nigger. But in France, in London, no. There you're just *one* thing, being and behaving, a nigger. So, you run into these stereotypes. They're all around you, part of the unconscious way of thinking, and so it becomes imperative to confront those stereotypes. And I would say that the guiding thread that has lasted all through my work is, How do you deal with the stereotyped view of yourself that you yourself have been socialized to accept? You understand what I mean? Because the stereotypes are not arbitrary. It's not a matter of someone getting

16 The reference is to Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1967), chap. 5.

up and suddenly being racist. It is that given the conception of what it is to be human, to be an imperial English man or woman, you had to be seen by them as the negation of what they were. So *you*, too, had to *circumcise* yourself of yourself, in order to be fully human.

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DS: Do you think that there's a way in which that transformation of the imagination depended on that displacement in London?

SW: That was very important. I've always felt a certain sympathy for students at the University of the West Indies because they don't experience that displacement. That displacement is very jolting because from that moment you can no longer coincide with yourself.

DS: So that displacement has a *hermeneutical* function?

SW: Very much so. Because the ground on which you stand, from which you had interpreted the world around you, is now shaken; all of the certainties that you had taken for granted in the Caribbean are now gone.

DS: You finish at the University of London, and you are imagining yourself to be an actress, trying parts and so on.

SW: A dancer, yes.

DS: And a dancer. You get married.

SW: Yes.

DS: To Jan Carew?

SW: No, no, first of all I got married to a Norwegian who lived in England. His name was Hans Ragnar Isachsen. He had fought as an air force pilot in World War II. He was training the El Al airline pilots in Israel, as well as flying for them, so we lived in Rome.

DS: And then you both returned to Jamaica?

SW: Yes, in the early fifties, thinking that we might be able to make it. He wanted to manufacture a certain kind of steel furniture and we were going to settle there. But then he found it was too difficult. We went back to Sweden, and I lived in Sweden for a year or so. And I was quite happy there, the Swedes were a fairly cosmopolitan people. But I had no *quarrel* with the place. If you go to Sweden, you will see that they're a reasonably just society. But I came to realize that I had no world there; I had no *engagement* there. In the meanwhile we'd had a daughter, then after a while we decided, fairly amiably, that it wasn't really working out. It wasn't that I was unhappy;

it's just that I had no reason for living there. I had no battle, of some sort, to fight. And so we got divorced and I went back to London. That's where I met Jan Carew, and that's when I began to try to become a writer. Meeting Jan reinforced this because, of course, as you know, he is a writer.<sup>17</sup>

DS: What year would this have been?

SW: This would have been in about 1957, '58.

DS: Is that when you began working on *The Hills of Hebron*?

SW: Actually, I began by writing plays. I remember we had met a young and talented Englishman, Robin Midgely. He was a producer for the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] radio. He had just come down from Cambridge, and I remember I did a translation of García Lorca's play *Yerma*. The play deals with the tragedy of a barren infertile woman. Because it is based so very much on the still traditional/rural metaphysics of southern Spain, it just can't be meaningfully translated into the English of an industrial society. So I translated its Spanish into the Jamaican Creole as a language that has emerged out of a parallel agrarian/rural structure. Robin Midgely produced it. Cleo Laine, the famous jazz singer, played the title role. We used Jamaican folk melodies for the songs. Cleo Laine sang them hauntingly.

DS: Was the play actually staged?

SW: No, only put on the radio. On one of the BBC's programmes. So I'm going to carry out my apprenticeship now by writing for the BBC. In fact, I wrote *The Hills of Hebron* originally as a play for the BBC called *Under the Sun*. Then I decided to try and rewrite it as a novel.<sup>18</sup>

DS: But you complete the novel in London.

SW: Yes.

DS: What would you say inspired the novel?

17 Jan Carew is a distinguished Caribbean novelist and essayist. Born in British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1925, he is the author of several books, including the novels *Black Midas* (1958), *The Last Barbarian* (1961), *Moscow is Not My Mecca* (1964) and, most recently, the essay *Ghosts in Our Blood: With Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean* (1994).

18 Wynter has said elsewhere that her chosen title for the novel was *The End of Exile*. It was her publishers who insisted on *The Hills of Hebron*, a title, she says, she never liked. See Sylvia Wynter, "Conversation with Sylvia Wynter", interview by Daryl Cumber Dance, in *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1992), 277.



SW: I think, as I said to you before, memories of spending the holidays in the country, partly in Westmoreland, at a place called Haldane Castle, where even today cars can't get up there, up to the top of the hill; and then in St Elizabeth, a place called Pisgah. These are fairly remote places. There was a conference held in the Bahamas in November 1998, the first international conference on Caribbean literature, and they asked me to look back at *The Hills of Hebron* some thirty-five years after, and I did.<sup>19</sup> And what struck me rereading it was that when Elsa Goveia says that one of the reasons we began to write in the clash of the anticolonial struggle was the desire to challenge the central belief system on which our societies were founded, the belief that the fact of blackness is a fact of inferiority and that of whiteness a fact of superiority. When I reread the novel, I could see that that was exactly what I was then doing.<sup>20</sup> I was grappling with this, with a world in which the fact of blackness *had* non-arbitrarily, and *necessarily*, to be a fact of inferiority. That's what I was grappling with, the refusal, the challenging, of that premise. There was my fascination too, of course, as you can see, with the whole idea of the legend of Prophet Bedward. And I remember Jan telling me about the parallel legend of Prophet Jordan in Guyana. Now, Jordan had actually put himself on the cross to be crucified. It was the fusing of these two prophets, and their movements together, that is at the centre of the novel.<sup>21</sup>

DS: *The Hills of Hebron* obviously is about many things, but one of the things that it is about is the nature of a kind of sovereignty and the nature of the leadership that imagines this alternative kind of sovereignty. Quite apart from what you've called the "ineptness" of the artistic quality of the work, *Hebron* is seeking to imagine a kind of cultural-political community that is not on the agenda of the nationalist movement.

SW: Exactly. Very much so. But then, you see, I think we need to go back and look at what the nationalist movement was *itself*. What we call the nationalist movement was really a drawing together of many movements. Bustamante's movement was not a nationalist movement. When he called it "labour", he was right. But it was not

19 The first International Conference on Caribbean Literature, Nassau, the Bahamas, 3–6 November 1998. The title of Wynter's presentation was, "A Look Back at *The Hills of Hebron* on the Eve of the New Millennium: After 'Man', Towards the Human".

20 Elsa Goveia (1925–80) was a historian and a humanist. She is the author of several path-breaking books in Caribbean history including the seminal *A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies* (1956; reprint, Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1980).

21 On Alexander Bedward see Barry Chevannes, "Revival and Black Struggle", *Savacou* 5 (1971): 27–39.

“labour” in the sense of the Marxist conception of labour either. It was very much the issue of *native* labour, as a secondary form of low-wage, lowly skilled, low standard of living labour, which it was the function of the colonial system to produce and reproduce. To move into a different paradigm, that of Fanon’s, these were part of the expendable category: of the seasonal sugar cane field workers, stone breakers, market women, casual labour, the *jobless* and their movement. Now, the normal proletariat can be made to work and to be happy to work only because of the threatened fate of *not* having a job, the fate that this native labour category is made to embody. Fanon, you recall, calls this category *les damnés*, the condemned.

So what I am saying here is that the nationalist movement actually comprised multiple movements. However, up until now, we’ve only had a *nationalist* interpretation of what happened. Because Bustamante’s movement was a labour movement, he would eventually form a party only to protect the gains of the Union.<sup>22</sup> The PNP [People’s National Party] would form unions only to protect their property, the nationalist party.

DS: I want to press you a little on this though, Sylvia. Leonard Howell’s Pinnacle and Bedward’s August Town community are forms of sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> They are forms, if you like, of communities that are structured in cultural-political terms, on a cultural logic, that is not part of the official society. And *Hills of Hebron* is an attempt to think through an alternative form of political order.

SW: You’re right. But to explain that sovereignty is very difficult within our normative concepts. The point is that this alternative form of sovereignty could only come from that group, as the society’s expendable *damnés*. That is the group which is the collective protagonist of the novel. Because of their systemic marginalization, they were forced to daily experience their deviance, their *imposed* liminal status with respect both to the normative order, and to what it is to be human in the terms of that order.

22 Bustamante was the founder of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) formally registered in January 1939) in the wake of the strikes and riots. In 1943 he founded the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), largely as a vehicle to contest the elections in 1944. The People’s National Party (PNP), founded in 1938, was initially connected to the Trade Union Council (TUC), but after the expulsion of the Marxists in 1952 founded the National Workers Union (NWX), which Michael Manley, after his return to Jamaica from Britain that year, was instrumental in building.

23 Leonard Howell is one of the earliest Rastafari leaders. For a useful discussion see Robert A. Hill, “Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari Religion in Jamaica”, *EPOCHÉ* 8 (1981): 31–70, published subsequently as “Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian visions in Early Rastafari”, *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 1 (1983): 24–39.

Now, this is somewhat of a leap, but be patient with me, because your point is crucial. Theoretically or conceptually, I am now trying to clarify something that I didn't know I was doing at the time when I wrote the novel. As you said, this is an entirely different form of sovereignty that we are dealing with. Now, we know about political sovereignty, especially with the rise of the state. We know about economic sovereignty, with the dominance of the free market all over the world, together with its economic organization of reality. We do *not* know about something called *ontological* sovereignty. And I'm being so bold as to say that in order to *speak* the conception of ontological sovereignty, we would have to move completely outside our present conception of what it is to be human, and therefore outside the ground of the orthodox body of knowledge which institutes and reproduces such a conception.

DS: Sylvia, that conception is of course where you have come *to*. And I want to take that up in its specificity. But I still want to press you on the kind of oppositional sensibility that *then* – late 1950s, early 1960s – goes into the fashioning of that community in *Hills of Hebron*. What is the dissatisfaction that you felt at the time, that inspired that refashioning of the problem of sovereignty?

SW: When I was reading your interview with Ken Post, I noted that he said how very painful for him his working-class origins had been, how he could never quite agree with what Richard Hoggart and the others such as E.P. Thompson were saying because he knew the reality of what that working-class origin had been.<sup>24</sup> The parallel here is that you cannot have a middle class as the norm of being human without the degradation of what is *not* the middle class, which is the working class, and the jobless. What *Hebron* did was to ask, "How do I experience myself? How do we experience ourselves against this parallel and even fiercer degradation?" You are engaged in a constant battle *not* to see yourself as that "dirty nigger" that, as Fanon says, all the discourses, all the literature, all the history, are telling you to see yourself as being. Remember all colonized peoples have now been classified as *natives*, and as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his preface to Fanon's second book, the world is divided into "men" and "natives".<sup>25</sup> But the trap for us, once educated, is that you have to choose whether your allegiance will be to the dominant world of the "men" or to the subordinated world of the "natives". You can be a V.S. Naipaul and choose allegiance to the

24 See David Scott, "'No Saviour From on High': An Interview with Ken Post", *Small Axe*, no. 4 (March 1998): 130–31.

25 See the opening sentences of Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon, *The Wretched*, 7.

world of the “men”, even if not managing to do so in as brilliantly creative a manner as he has done. But if you’re choosing to throw your allegiance to the side of the “natives”, then your position will still be precarious. You see, you are still powerfully tempted by the world of the “men” since *that* is what and where real normalcy is. The *men*, Sartre wrote, have the Word. The *natives* can have only the use of it.

DS: One of the curious things about *The Hills of Hebron* is its temporal setting. You are a far way into the novel before you come upon a temporal marker indicating that the drama takes place in the 1920s. Why place the drama in the novel at that kind of temporal distance from your own immediate political horizon?

SW: I think because it was originally written as a play. So there is the demand imposed by the structure of a play. You can *see* that opening scene. And so I think when I was writing the novel, the way I had already written it as a play would determine its shape. Also I saw the “prophetic” movements of a Bedward and Jordan as the precursor movements to the anticolonial movement that had opened onto my own immediate political horizon. But I also saw that those earlier movements raised a specific political issue for which we still have no name. You could say it was a question of being, but not in the sense of something unique to you as an individual, of something personal. For whereas in the feminist movement now they’d say the personal is the political, for my generation the personal was never taken, in this sense, very seriously. You knew that you had this battle, but I think there was always the recognition that what was happening to you was totally linked to what was happening to others. People ask me, “Why don’t you write an autobiography?” But I have never been able to think that way. I don’t know quite how to explain it. My generation, I think, would find it impossible to emphasize the personal at the expense of the political – even speaking to Richard Hart you would find the same thing, that his autobiography would be linked up with those political movements.<sup>26</sup> The idea of what happens to you would always remain a secondary subject, because that’s how you lived and experienced it. The circumstances have changed, and one would experience it quite differently now.

DS: I want to focus a little bit on this question of generation. The moment of the late 1950s, early 1960s, fascinates me for the obvious reason that it is in some way a kind

26 Indeed, witness the effacement of the autobiographical voice in Richard Hart’s *Rise and Organise: The Birth of the Workers and Nationalist Movements in Jamaica 1936–1939* (London: Kariu, 1989) and *Towards Decolonization*.

of absent presence for me. I wasn't there, but it has made me possible. And so gaining a sense of its texture has been a preoccupation for me, a sense of the mixture of anxiety and hope, of anticipation and betrayal. And one of the passages that is an endless source of reflection for me is the closing passage of George Lamming's *Season of Adventure*. "As a child treads soft" – Do you remember this? – "As a child treads soft in new school shoes, and a man is nervous who knows his first night watch may be among thieves, so the rhythms are not sure but their hands must be attentive, and so recent is the season of adventure, so fresh from the miracle of their triumph, the drums are guarding the day, the drums must guard the day."<sup>27</sup> Do you recognize yourself in that play of anxiety and hope, of anticipation and betrayal, that is part of Lamming's evocation?

SW: Yes, I think he's caught it exactly there. Because remember, it was very difficult to think we could do these things like writing a novel. It was *very* difficult to think we could do *anything*. Because where I think there is a *great* distance between today's feminists and myself is that then we knew that it was *as a population* – men, women and children – that we had thought we could not do *anything*. So you are trying to do everything new and you're fearful that you mightn't be able to do it. Because there's been no established tradition. Now, *you* have a tradition, you can quote from Lamming, and others. But we – *then* – had no such tradition, because although people like C.L.R. James would have written a novel, we hadn't heard about it, it wasn't taught in the schools.<sup>28</sup> You see, I want us to begin to understand the *total* way in which the domination [was exercised] in the colonies primarily through the schools, the education system.

DS: You say that *I* can look back on a tradition and I think that is true, which is what makes *our* discussion here possible, and for *me* generative and fruitful. But there was something of an emerging tradition that you *certainly* reflect on somewhat later, in writers like Vic Reid whose *New Day* was published in 1949, and Roger Mais whose novels appear in the early 1950s.

SW: Yes. But they were themselves just a part of that time.

DS: Have you read Vic Reid by the time you've returned to Jamaica in the late 1950s?

SW: I'm pretty sure I would have, yes.

<sup>27</sup> George Lamming, *Season of Adventure* (1960; reprint, London: Allison and Busby, 1979), 367.

<sup>28</sup> The reference is to C.L.R. James, *Ninety Alley* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1936).

DS: And you would have read Roger Mais?

SW: I would have very much read [him], definitely. So those would have been behind what I was doing, of course.

DS: Exactly. They constitute what you call elsewhere the “first wave” of writers.

SW: The first wave, yes. But nevertheless, we’re still all very new. Do you know what I’m trying to say?

DS: It’s still new, of course. But is there a sense when you are writing *The Hills of Hebron* that *your* moment is in important ways different from Reid’s and Mais’s moment? That in some ways the coming sovereignty for Reid – perhaps less so for Mais – is at a greater distance. By the time your generation is involved in this transformation of the imagination, sovereignty is upon you. Which is in part why I think that the anxiety that emerges in that moment of Lamming’s prose is so poignant. Because you are literally about to begin that season of adventure.

SW: Yes. And although we in a sense laugh at the idea of the white man’s burden, when you are subordinated and sort of taken care of, you are somewhat freed from anxiety. But when you break against it, there is this awesome idea that you are now responsible. So it’s this sense of responsibility, of anxiety. But certainly, with it, the sweeping feeling that it’s the beginning of a new moment in history, that an entire subordinated people are moving now to take responsibility for themselves and to make mistakes. There is now the terror of making mistakes, of not being adequate, yet of constantly being impelled to take charge. But he [Lamming] catches that beautifully.

DS: Is there a temptation *not* to return to Jamaica?

SW: I don’t think so; I think events just happened. In England, once I had published a novel, and Jan and I had begun to write for television, formal independence had come to the Caribbean, and we decided to go back home. So I went ahead to Guyana, because we knew Cheddi Jagan quite well.<sup>29</sup> We were going to go and work with

29 Dr Cheddi Jagan was president of Guyana between October 1992 and his death in March 1997. A leading Caribbean nationalist and communist, he was a founder of the Political Affairs Committee in 1946, a group of intellectuals – including Sidney King, Martin Carter, Brindley Benn and, much later, Forbes Burnham – who came together to agitate for constitutional reform. In 1950 it was dissolved and the People’s Political Party founded. In April 1953 the party swept the first elections under universal suffrage, Jagan becoming the first prime minister. However, in October of the same year the colonial authorities suspended the constitution and threw Jagan out of

Cheddi and write for their information service and so on. So I went ahead. We were being totally idealistic, but that again came from that service tradition about which we spoke earlier. And so I went ahead to Guyana, and my experience there was going to be very, very formative for me; it was going to transform the thrust of where I was going.

DS: I'm sorry, Sylvia. Give me the year.

SW: The year? Nineteen sixty-one, the year when there would be the riots in Guyana.<sup>30</sup> I left Jan behind, and I went with our two children. And this was the height of the fierce conflict between Cheddi Jagan, who was then in power, and the black party, the PNC [People's National Congress], led by Forbes Burnham. There was also the Portuguese party. And when I arrived they said that I had been sent to bring money from the Communist Party to Cheddi. As my mother-in-law said, "And I don't see a *red cent* of it!" So I go into this situation, and I'm there, and two distinguished economists had come from England. They were famous Hungarian economists; they went around to different countries writing prescriptions for what they called budgets of development. And so they'd come to Guyana and gotten Cheddi in trouble because, not knowing the fundamental division between Indians and black, they had placed taxes on everything which the black Guyanese used, which were imported, and spared what the Indians ate, which were not imported. Then everything starts blowing up: labour strikes, marches and so on.

So I remember Janet Jagan calling me and asking would I come over and write some radio scripts that would explain what the budget was about. So I took my little typewriter and I was escorted through back roads and back doors and back gates to get to this Red House, and I start to try and write my script. But at this time masses of people are marching towards the Red House, and Georgetown is burning, and I am inside the Red House. I'll never forget that! Because for one thing, what I remember is the gentleness of Cheddi Jagan as a person. A lot of people had taken refuge in there, and I remember him going around, concerned for the babies, if they had enough milk – an extraordinary kind of human being. Yet as I looked out the window – you see, what was traumatic for me was the stark nature of the division between black and

office. In 1955 the party split, with Burnham founding the People's National Congress. Jagan was also the author of several books, including *Forbidden Freedom: The Story of the Suppression of the Constitutional Government of British Guiana* (New York: International Publishers, 1954) and *The West on Trial: My Fight for Guyana's Freedom* (London: Michael Joseph, 1966).

30 For an account of the riots see Peter Newman, *British Guiana: Problems of Cohesion in an Immigrant Society* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1964).

Indian – you had a black policemen at the gate, but you had a sharp-shooting Indian from the coast with a rifle aimed at him from the upstairs window. And outside you have the masses of people streaming towards [the Red House] and Georgetown is burning . . . and riots!

So I always tell this joke against myself. Cheddi asks for the British troops to be sent in. And I – I who had railed against colonialism all my life – I was never happier to hear those British boots rattling on the pavement as they came around the corner and began to set up machine guns and barbed wire. And, of course, the crowd began to melt at that moment. And then I came out. It was a traumatic experience. What is very interesting – and I want you to note this but I'm not noting this to make a cheap point but an important one – at the moment that I am inside the Red House, at that moment, Michael Manley – who belonged to the Caribbean Congress of Labour, one of the US-inspired free world organizations – had been sent as a representative and he was outside preaching *against* Cheddi Jagan!<sup>31</sup>

I am just trying to note how the shifts in our positions are going to come about. Then I'm inside the Red House and he's on the side out there. But then, in the days that followed on the riots, I realized a tragedy of enormous proportions was arising in Guyana. Because the division between the black and the Indian groups was profound. And I also realized, as I lived there, that however much the blacks struggled, they were eventually going to be displaced. I tried to speak to Cheddi. I said that whilst I'd love to continue working there it seemed to me that the greatest emphasis was to see if we could begin to build a common history, place the emphasis on creating a sense of a shared community, of solidarity, because that did not exist. But Cheddi at that time was a very orthodox Marxist, and to even suggest that the superstructure was not automatically determined by the mode of production but was *constructed*, so that you can *reconstruct* it, that would have been heresy for him, genuinely. And then all kinds of rashes, of eruptions, began to break out on my skin, because of the trauma of the situation. And so I said to him that I'd have to go. So I went back to Jamaica because I was of no use any longer in Guyana.

DS: Lloyd Best was in Georgetown at the time, was he not?<sup>32</sup>

31 See the account in Jeffrey Harrod, *Trade Union Foreign Policy: A Study of British and American Trade Union Activities* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 392.

32 See Best's account in David Scott, "The Vocation of a Caribbean Intellectual: An Interview with Lloyd Best". *Small Axe*, no. 1 (March 1997): 132.



SW: I'm not sure. He might have been. Later on it turned out that the riots were part of a CIA-inspired movement. But having been there, I know that the CIA can only act on the basis of divisions that are already there. There were profound divisions that are still coming out into the open in Guyana today. Up until then, like most of my generation, I was a Marxist because Marxism gave you a key which said look, you can understand the reality of which you're a part. This was my thinking until then. But from that moment I said, no, there is something important that this paradigm cannot deal with. A lot of my rethinking came out of that experience. It was not a matter of negating the Marxian paradigm but of realizing that it was one aspect of something that was larger. So everything that happened to me would come out of that moment.

DS: You then leave Georgetown.

SW: And go back to Jamaica. And Jan is supposed to come and join me there. And then what happens is that the elections have been held, and the N.W. Manley government has been voted out of power, and the JLP is in power. And my stepfather belonged to the JLP, and he is at that time Speaker of the House of Representatives.<sup>33</sup> And by this time, Hector had been asked by this government to come and serve in the Ministry of Education. So he left the university on leave and went there.

DS: He was then at *Extra Mural*.<sup>34</sup>

SW: Yes. Now, when I went to Jamaica I had to look for a job, right, because one of the reasons I left British Guiana was that whilst they had money to pay me, and I would have had a salary, and so would Jan, we would not have had a budget that would have allowed us to do anything worthwhile about the urgent racial problem that confronted Guyana.

DS: But the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica, employs you.

SW: When I came there was no job available, but there was a job in the Jamaica Information Service, and I got the job. But, of course, the moment I went in – remember now, the PNP is not only a party, it is the party of the intelligentsia; all the bureaucrats are PNP, it's a cultural thing, it's not even a political thing – and so I was

<sup>33</sup> The late Hon Mr E.C.L. Parkinson, QC. Parkinson was also something of a legal scholar. See his, "The Evolution of Jamaican Law", *Jamaica Journal* 5, nos. 2–3 (June–September 1971): 24–27.

<sup>34</sup> The Department of Extra-Mural Studies has been a key institution in the development of the University of the West Indies. See the story told in Philip Sherlock and Rex Nettleford, *The University of the West Indies: A Caribbean Response to the Challenge of Change* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 53–62.

seen as coming in as a spy. So although I had a quite humble job, I aroused great resentment.

DS: As a PNP spy.

SW: No, no, no, as a JLP spy.

DS: A JLP spy?

SW: Yes.

DS: Because the Jamaica Information Service is largely being run by intellectuals who are of PNP affiliation.

SW: It's not merely a political allegiance; it's a cultural-political allegiance. So I experienced quite a bit of resentment. After a while, I decided I was going to set up a folk theatre. Gradually, I got quite a few of my colleagues to begin to work with me on the project. And Carlos Malcolm wrote the music, and we wrote a play called *Shh . . . It's a Wedding*, and some of the people in the office took part in it. So because of this venture the resentment sort of faded. Besides, I think they realized that I'm not the type that would have the capacity for spying. Anyway, we toured the island with the play. Carlos Malcolm was extremely talented.<sup>35</sup> Where is he now? I wonder where he is: he is so brilliant. So we tried to set up a folk theatre. That lasted for about a year and a half. I even began dancing again.

DS: In the context of this theatre?

SW: Yes. Then an opening at UWI [University of the West Indies] came. You see, my specialty had been the literature of Spain. And so a slot became available at UWI and they offered me the job.

DS: In the Department of Spanish?

SW: In the Department of Spanish. That's how I came to enter academia. And by this time, Jan had decided that he could not make it in Jamaica, that it was too small, and Jan is a very large person. When I say large, I mean, his imagination, his thinking. So

<sup>35</sup> Carlos Malcolm is a trombonist and percussionist. In the 1960s he formed a group called the Afro-Jamaican Rhythms which made a number of recordings, perhaps the best remembered of which is their rendition of "Rukumbine". Malcolm also worked at the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation as an arranger/producer. According to Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton, *Reggae: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1997), 48, Malcolm arranged all the local music featured in the James Bond film, *Dr No*.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SYLVIA WYNTER

Scene from *Shh . . . It's a Wedding*, Jamaica, early 1960s (Sylvia Wynter fourth from left)

he left and went back to England, and we got divorced, and I remained with the children in Jamaica.

DS: Thinking now pre-1968 (because I want to come to 1968 and what follows in a moment), does the surge in the Rastafari movement in the early 1960s interest you? Does the emergence of ska and popular musical forms interest you?

SW: Very much so.

DS: Obviously there is Malcolm.

SW: Carlos Malcolm. You see, through him I had got hooked into the music scene. I still remember his “Rukumbine”, it’s an exhilarating sound! And I remember the first ska was a political ska. I remember it was directed at Lady Bustamante.

DS: It was “Carry Go Bring Come”.<sup>36</sup> “Carry go bring come, my dear, bring misery.”

<sup>36</sup> Not quite the first ska. “Carry Go Bring Come” was recorded by Justin Hines and the Dominoes in 1964.

SW: I think what happened is that at this moment, because political independence has been won, with the independence and the modernization of the economic system, what also began was an expansion of the category of the expendables, of the jobless, of what I call "the jobless archipelago". And then Rastafarianism begins to become a force. You can see it in the realm of the imaginary. Because what is Rastafari doing? It is transforming symbols, it is *re-semanticizing* them. And by the way, what I had done with Moses in *The Hills of Hebron*, I'm pretty sure I would have had the Rastafarians in the back of my mind. Because their re-semanticizing of the meaning of blackness was already there since the thirties. But they now began to have a pervasive presence. At the same time, because the PNP were out of power they had become very radical. And so you began to get this phenomenon where radicalism begins to take on a Rastafarian face.

DS: In fact, the PNP at this point, in the early 1960s, after its defeat, begins to attract a number of young intellectuals just back from London.

SW: Exactly.

DS: The Young Socialist League, for example, is formed.<sup>37</sup> Are you attracted to that?

SW: No, I don't think so.

DS: But are you attracted to the discussions that are going on around these radical elements connected to the PNP in the early 1960s?

SW: I can't remember. I remember knowing John Maxwell whom I liked very much, and I remember speaking a lot with him.<sup>38</sup> That is very vivid in my mind. But can you mention any other names?

DS: What about Hugh Small?

SW: No, not Hugh Small. Oh, but at that time, at the university, while I was not necessarily a central part of it, what I was somewhat involved with, was it *New World Quarterly*?

DS: Yes, *New World Quarterly*.

37 On the Young Socialist League see Obika Gray, *Radicalism and Social Change in Jamaica, 1960-1972* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), chap. 5; and Robert Hill's remarks in David Scott, "The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill", *Small Axe*, no. 5 (March 1999): 94-98.

38 John Maxwell is a veteran Jamaican journalist with *Left* sympathies. There is a memorable portrait of him, *John M.*, painted by Valerie Bloomfield in the early 1970s.

SW: The whole idea of conceptualizing the plantation as the starting point of the modern world and developing a new scholarship based on that attracted me intellectually. Now, I was never intimately a part, I was always on the fringe; but, nevertheless, I was a part of that. Was Lloyd Best there [in Jamaica] then? Because I knew Lloyd, my big connection was with him, and always too with George Beckford. Beckford and Best, I always felt intellectually close to the two of them.

DS: In these years, you published two things in *New World Quarterly*, actually. The first of them is that poem entitled “Malcolm X”. It’s a kind of evocation of Malcolm’s presence after his brutal assassination. And you also publish a marvellous review of Peter Abrahams’s *This Island Now*, in which you likened the novel to instant coffee. You probably don’t remember this. “Easily digestible, and as easily forgotten.”<sup>39</sup>

SW: Yes, yes.

DS: But here, as elsewhere, in your later work in particular, there is a sense of impatience with a certain kind of superficiality which is what you are reading in Abrahams’s novel. And your impatience, in fact, as one sees in the work of the late 1960s, early 1970s, is across the ideological spectrum – both with people who one may think of as being hostile to you as well as people who may be sympathetic to you.

SW: I think I sort of knew that there was something that I myself was lacking in, so the impatience was also being hurled at myself, a feeling that while we should be bringers of something new, we hadn’t quite brought it. Something like that. As I said, when you sent me a copy of “Creole Criticism”, and I reread it, I thought to myself: my heavens, how cruel I was! And yet still, looking back, I know that I was fighting the same issue that I’ve just fought in attacking the creolists in a recent essay.<sup>40</sup> And you will notice that the question that I’m always insisting on is, Why do we always want to displace, to *non-recognize*, this connection with Africa? Why is it such a cursed thing that we need so to avoid it? Or to superficialize it, as we now largely do? Kente-clothing it?

DS: I want to come to that moment in a bit, Sylvia, that moment of the early 1970s in your work, but I want to stay for a bit with the late 1960s. You have, by the middle

39 Sylvia Wynter, “Malcolm X”, *New World Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Dead Season 1965): 12, and “The Instant Novel-Now”, *New World Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (High Season 1967): 78–81.

40 Sylvia Wynter, “‘A Different Kind of Creature’: Caribbean Literature, the Cyclops Factor and the Second Poetics of the *Propter Nos*”, *Annals of Scholarship* 12, nos. 1 and 2 (1997): 153–72 (special issue on “Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature”, guest edited by Kamau Brathwaite and Timothy J. Reiss).

1960s, a connection to *New World Quarterly*. And there is an obvious kind of identification with the impulse of the work in *New World Quarterly*, a certain kind of thinking critically from *within*. But you are also part of the founding of *Jamaica Journal*. Tell me about that founding, what kinds of conversations went into the thinking through of that founding and who else was involved in that?

SW: The main person was a teacher who had come to teach in Jamaica. His name was Alex Gradussov. He was born in Estonia, of Russian and German parents, and then was taken as a boy to Nazi Germany. As a boy with a Russian surname in Nazi Germany he had experienced what it was to be an “underman” to the “pure” Aryan. At the end of the war he had gone to Australia, and from there had come to teach in Jamaica.<sup>41</sup> Then there was Rex Nettleford who was on the board. The journal wasn’t his original idea, but he was part of the Institute of Jamaica. The novelist Neville Dawes had also come to work there.<sup>42</sup> But in many ways the whole idea of the visual aspect of the journal was very much Alex’s. He went around the island and bought paintings from new painters, especially Rastafarian ones, encouraging them and so on. Then, coming out of my own experience in Guyana, I had become very interested in the idea of how you create a superstructure, of how you can induce a sense of solidarity, of continuity. So the decision to borrow the name of *Jamaica Journal* from an earlier planter class journal was deliberate on my part. The idea was that you’re going to keep a continuity with the past, but you are going at the same time to transform the *conception* of that past. So that was how the journal came together. In addition, [Edward] Seaga was then in the government, as minister of information, and he had also had the idea that there should be such a journal. But the conception of it, and the decision to use the name *Jamaica Journal* came from me. One of the first things in it is my review of *Lady Nugent’s Journal*.<sup>43</sup> I know it’s a very difficult thing to

41 Alex Gradussov is someone whose contribution to the arts and humanities in postindependence Jamaica deserves a good deal of careful attention. He served as the founding editor of *Jamaica Journal* from 1967 until he was succeeded by Roy Reynolds in the March issue of 1972. See his programmatic foreword to the first issue. But equally, if not more importantly, he is the author of a number of significant essays on the visual and dramatic arts. Among these are the following: “Carl Abrahams: Painter and Cartoonist”, *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 1 (March 1969): 43–46, “Kapo: Cult Leader, Sculptor, Painter”, *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 2 (June 1969): 46–51, “Why Art? What Is Modern?”, *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 4 (December 1967): 41–50, and “Thoughts about the Theatre in Jamaica”, *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 1 (March 1970): 46–52.

42 Neville Dawes, a much-neglected writer, is the author of the novels, *The Last Enchantment* (1960) and *Interim* (1977), and the important monograph, *Prolegomena to Caribbean Literature*, African-Caribbean Institute Monograph Series 1 (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1977).

43 Sylvia Wynter, “Lady Nugent’s Journal”, *Jamaica Journal* 1, no. 1 (December 1967): 23–34.

understand. I wanted us to assume our past: slaves, slave masters and all. And then, *reconceptualize* that past. I don't know quite how to explain it, I wanted us to . . .

**SMALL** DS: To live imaginatively through the furnace of the past.

**AXE** SW: Exactly! I didn't want us to go for what I call a cheap and easy radicalism. You see, because we have taken from the West their conception of freedom and slavery, we tend to conceptualize freedom and slavery only in their terms. Yet when we look at African conceptions of slavery, it's entirely different. For the Congolese, for example, the slave was the lineage-less man and woman who had fallen out of the protection of their lineage. The opposite to slave is not only being free: the opposite to slave is also *belonging* to a lineage. What I'm trying to say is that we have looked back on our slave past with a shudder, and so we've not been able to see it. For example, everything that I am I know that I owe it to the fact that in the back of my head there is this idea: "If they could have so stoically come across that middle passage, come to build a new world, to create the kind of music that they have done, then there is nothing I can't do." You see, we have never gone back to that slave past and taken it positively, seen the legacy of everyday heroism and endurance that our slave ancestors left us. We've fallen into the trap of the one-sided perspective of the abolitionists, which was necessary for them then; they were they were fighting to abolish slavery, after all. I know this is a difficult argument, but I felt that we needed to assume our entire past.

DS: But not only *assume* it, I hear you saying that there is a kind of imaginative *reliving* that is part of a kind of *transformation* of the self.

SW: Precisely.

DS: Where were you during the famous crisis of October 1968?

SW: Oh, my dear! I so enjoyed Ken Post's account of that event.<sup>44</sup> That day was my mother's birthday, October the sixteenth. I will never forget it! I am getting a drive up to work, because I don't drive, and the same thing that struck Post – these students in their scarlet gowns – struck me. I will never forget that! The first time I had heard about Walter Rodney being banned might have been on the radio in the morning, I'm not sure. I know I was preparing for my class. Then as I was going up to the university, there was the march, the police. Of course, I had to turn back. So you see, again, I was on the fringe, I was on the outside. Or, in a *sense*, you could say I was on

<sup>44</sup> The reference is to Scott, "No Saviour From on High", 99–104.

the *other* side, because remember, by now, my brother is with the JLP, and I'm living with my mother and stepfather, I'm living in their house. In fact, his car had been taking me up to work that morning. So I was on the other side. That was how I lived it. Yet whichever side I was with, I always ended up on the fringes.

DS: Are you then yourself identified, not only identified but do you *identify yourself* with the Jamaica Labour Party?

SW: Well, let me put it this way. I've always felt that the point of view of the JLP has not ever been tellable. Because you couldn't tell it within the terms of the nationalist narrative, nor in that of the Marxian narrative either. If you ask why did the very bottom people turn to Busta, to understand that you have to understand the [social] structure in Jamaica. Now, I'd like to introduce to you to a category from Asmarom Legesse. He calls it "liminal",<sup>45</sup> but he doesn't use it only as Victor Turner uses it.<sup>46</sup> He says that in every society there is a category that embodies the deviant Other to the normal identity of the society. When I had been a part of the PNP, during the anticolonial struggles, they had been liminal, deviant. Once they got into power, however, they were to become very orthodox, nowhere more so than when they are being most revolutionary and radical. Now, had Busta got a formal education, like Manley, and gone into a profession, he never would have been at the head of that movement in 1938; he would have ended up as a member of the PNP. But you see, because of his liminality, with respect to education – he was barely educated, he had had to go all over the world, hustling, looking for a living – that avenue would have been ruled out. All he had would have had going for him in Jamaica was his high colour, as we say. So it is that existential liminality that makes him able at that time to speak for the fringe labour categories of the sugar plantation workers, for the jobless and so on. At the same time also, remember, it's also an opportunity for him to insert himself into a structure in which, normally, he would have had no place, no status.

Now, to answer your question, because I always tend to find myself on the side of the marginal, I tended to (and still do) identify myself with the JLP. And because for the proper, formally educated intelligentsia, anyone who identifies with the JLP is either an "ignorant" labourite or a "reactionary" capitalist, for someone like myself *not* to identify with the PNP ranked and ranks as intellectual heresy. Even now, I find

45 Asmarom Legesse, *Gada: Approaches to the Study of an African Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

46 See, famously, Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–110, and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).



myself being put on the defensive. But I realize that is my fault, because until one has a different conceptualization from which to work, one is always put on the defensive. And that's what I have been trying to grapple with all these years in which I have been trying to write a political biography both of Bustamante and of the Jamaica of his time. I have had to be grappling with an intelligentsia mindset in which, willy-nilly, I too shared. You see, if you think, as most formally educated and therefore westernized intellectuals tend to do, that what you're doing is historically destined and historically right, you can be very destructive because of the genuine belief that what you are doing is historically destined, that yours is the only right side. That is why it has only been with the post-1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent challenge to the absolutism of the Marxist-Stalinist paradigm, that new ways of thinking about the JLP/PNP politico-cultural dynamics are becoming possible.

DS: There's a very real way in which part of the reason that there have been so few attempts to write a complex history of the JLP and of Bustamante has to do with the teleological sense of that brown middle class that it itself was destined to rule. And they could only see the JLP's connection to ordinary people as a function or a fiction of manipulation.

SW: Yes, very true. But this is now also true of the now solidly established formally educated black middle class.

DS: And for these very reasons it has made it very difficult for a lot of people to see the fracturing and transformation of the PNP in recent years. Histories of the PNP and of the nationalist movement are written as though there is a kind of inherent destiny of that intelligentsia to lead and to represent the people.

SW: That's well put. It's what C.L.R. James saw from as early as 1948.<sup>47</sup> That the problem with Stalin was his central idea that being an intellectual from a proletarian line of descent destined you historically to take over, to rule, to absolutize, to establish a dictatorship *over* the real-life proletariat! That is why, for example, if you were of bourgeois origin in Stalin's Russia, you could be excluded. And whether you think you are historically destined because you were of black descent or of white descent, or

47 The reference is to C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*. It was written in 1948 and circulated within the political tendency James led, the Johnson-Forest Tendency. It was first published in 1965 by Facing Reality.

of intelligentsia descent, or of proletarian descent, or of bourgeois descent, the shared fallacy is of some sort of bio-hereditarian right to rule, to be wealthy, well educated.

DS: I wonder, Sylvia, whether one can say that part of your response to the PNP on the one hand and the JLP on the other is a rejection of the *hubris* of the middle-class intelligentsia.

SW: I think so.

DS: So that even though your political demands, at a certain level, might have been closer to the political demands of the PNP, there was a sensibility through which those demands were structured that you would have rejected.

SW: That is so. Remember that I began as part of the PNP. I remember my mother canvassing for the PNP candidate, Florizel Glasspole, helping to get him elected in one of the earliest elections held on the basis of universal adult suffrage. So my critique of the PNP comes, I suppose, from an impatience with that to which you had once been close, then intellectually and imaginatively grown away from.

#### THE CRITICISM OF CREOLE CRITICISM

DS: Nineteen sixty-eight is followed by *Abeng*.<sup>48</sup> And there is a growing sense among many that significant changes are going to take place, or at any rate, there is a growing sense of what the demand ought to be. Are you sympathetic?

SW: Sort of. But, you know, this was definitely a different generation, this was going to be Bobby Hill's generation. I was sympathetic, but I really didn't have much to do with it. I don't think I wrote anything for it. I didn't even know Bobby at the time.

DS: One of your earliest and best-known articles is published in *Jamaica Journal* in December 1968. It was entitled, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture", a phrase that you take from Fitzroy Fraser's 1962 novel, *Wounds in the Flesh*.<sup>49</sup> In that article you are drawing a distinction between *kinds* of

48 On *Abeng*, see Gray, *Radicalism and Social Change*, chap. 8; Rupert Lewis, "Learning to Blow the Abeng: A Critical Look at Anti-establishment Movements in the 1960s and 1970s", *Small Axe*, no. 1 (March 1997): 5-17; Scott, "No Saviour From on High"; and Scott, "The Archaeology of Black Memory".

49 Fitzroy Fraser, *Wounds in the Flesh* (London: New Authors, 1962); Sylvia Wynter, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism", parts 1 and 2, *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4 (December 1968): 23-32; 3, no. 1 (March 1969): 27-42.

criticism, between an acquiescent, in some sense *objectivist*, criticism on the one hand and a challenging, perhaps more *engaged*, criticism on the other hand. What is the context of debate out of which this argument of yours emerges? What is the background of debate that is impelling you to construe criticism in this way? So I am not so much asking you about the argument itself in the essay as what it is you understand yourself to be arguing *in relation to*?

SW: Have you got a copy of that first part? I have a copy of the second part, so I was only able to reread the second part. But I remember distinctly that it was a sort of intellectual anger at the implications of Louis James's book, *Islands in Between*.<sup>50</sup> Now, among the contributors W.I. Carr was a professor of English at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and Wayne Brown was his student, and I felt I had to call in question the implications of their critical essays. The central implication that I wanted to cut across was that they did not see their own connection with the Caribbean, they did not see that what is called the West, rather than Latin-Christian Europe, *begins* with the founding of the post-1492 Caribbean. So they wrote as if they were Englishmen coming to something alien to them.

DS: They wrote from a kind of epistemological *outside*.

SW: Yes. The premise was "they are the West Indies and we are Englishmen who have merely come to teach here", not realizing that the condition of *their* being what they are today, and the condition of *we* being what we are today are totally interlinked. That you can't separate the strands of that very same historical process which has, by and large, enriched their lives and, at the same time, largely impoverished the lives of the majority of our people. So that was the major problem: their blindness to a fact that should have been the starting point of their reading of Caribbean texts. Also, I was angry because Wayne Brown was a Caribbean student of Carr's, and Wayne Brown repeated the idea that this is an "unsettled" culture, while the idea that the norm and the ideal to be followed is that of a culturally "settled" England. I think that was what I was trying to demolish. At the same time, I had had an extraordinary experience of reading a set of essays by T.W. Adorno which was called *Prisms*.<sup>51</sup> What

50 Louis James, *The Islands in Between* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). This was the first collection of critical essays devoted to Caribbean literature.

51 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (1967; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981). Adorno (1903–69) was a leading member of the Frankfurt School. He is the author, famously, of *Minima Moralia* (1951; reprint, London: Verso, 1974), *Negative Dialectics* (1966; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1983), and with Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1982).

was important for me was that I had been educated, like all of us are, as good empiricists in the British school or the American school, where you never challenge *presuppositions*, because you take those for granted. I remember when I started reading Adorno – I still remember that first page – I couldn't realize at first that I was finding it difficult, not because of what he was saying but rather because he was thinking in an entirely new way, everywhere questioning the presuppositions that underlay what he was saying. That was, for me, a remarkable breaking through moment. So the essay "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together" is also me trying to break through to a new way of thinking.

DS: I want to come back to Adorno. But is part of the context and part of the character of your intervention in this debate shaped by the larger social/political radicalization of the late 1960s?

SW: Well, you see, the point is that my own radicalization, which had begun with the anticolonial movements, had never ceased. All that was happening was that after leaving Guyana I realized that there is something important that cannot be explained, either in the liberal-humanist or in the Marxist paradigms. So then there is trepidation; it's a season of adventure, you are sailing outside those limits, you are trying to find something else. You understand what I mean? Because I saw all the Rastafarian paintings on the street, I saw this blossoming. I saw Rastafarians creating their own imaginary. And then I began to see that this new imaginary was one that the dominant imaginary must function to depress and negate. So what is this dominant imaginary? How can we begin to criticize it? So now I'm groping in search of it. So Carr and Louis James, Wayne Brown, their interpretations were like evidences of a Leviathan not quite grasped, yet which had to be displaced.

DS: One of the things about this essay that, to my mind, bears remarking on is your admiration for two writers in particular: Roger Mais and George Lamming. These are writers who occupy somewhat different moments in relation to the unfolding cultural nationalism of the immediate preindependence period. But they are writers who share deeply in what I would call a kind of embattled humanism.

SW: That's very good, David. That term.

DS: This is something that one sees in parts 1 and 2 of the 1968–69 essay. Indeed, that is a thread, it seems to me, that links your early work with the later, this admiration for an embattled humanism.

SW: Yes, I suppose that the reason why I would have gotten so angry was because, of course, neither Carr nor James could know the dimension of what Roger Mais would have meant. What was worse, they didn't know that they didn't know this dimension, one that they could in no way have *experienced*. I think this is what Ken Post is really beginning to recognize, with the relationship of dominance/subordination here, that the power relationship is far more one between the descendants of a *colonizer* population and the descendants of a *colonized* one. And it's the dynamics of this pre-existent structural relation that Carr and James could have had no way of grasping, and therefore no way of grasping the dimensions of what you so aptly define as the embattled humanism of Roger Mais! And why I like that phrase is that, as Aimé Césaire says in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, "They say I'm the enemy of Europe; where have I ever said that there can be any going back to a *before* Europe?"<sup>52</sup> So your idea of an embattled humanism precisely identifies the dilemma of Mais's situation, in that if you are Mais, Césaire, you know that you cannot turn your back on that which the West has brought in since the fifteenth century. It's transformed the world, and central to that has been humanism. But it's also that humanism against which Fanon writes [in *The Wretched of the Earth*] when he says, they talk about man and yet murder him everywhere on the street corners. Okay. So it is that embattled [humanism], one which challenges itself at the same time that you're using it to think with. This was what N.W. Manley remembered about Mais. Winston Churchill had said, "The sun shall never set on the British Empire", you know. That was a great speech by a great figure who would defeat the Nazis. Yet here was Roger Mais standing up to Churchill, writing this excoriating article about exactly what the sun will not set on, then showing the massive poverty of the colonial Caribbean, the degradation of concrete humans, that was/is the price of empire, of the kind of humanism that underlies it.<sup>53</sup>

DS: Do you remember Roger Mais?

SW: Something like the way I remember Richard Hart. They are both people that could have made a choice. In my society, growing up, we were poor. So you can't say that I could have made a choice. But *they* could have made a choice. They were not

52 This is a paraphrase. See Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 23.

53 Roger Mais, "Now We Know", *Public Opinion*, 11 July 1944, 2. Mais was jailed for this article. The N.W. Manley reference is to his short essay, "Roger Mais: The Writer", which introduces Mais's *The Three Novels of Roger Mais* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966).

poor; they belonged to the upper middle class, white or very light-skinned middle class. They could have gone with the flow. And so they had almost a harder battle, you know? And they went against it, and so I just remember them as people who had made the difficult choice to side with, to identify with, the poor. And I felt that this was something that a Louis James or a Carr, and in fact, most of the postcolonial thinkers of today cannot understand, since they have never experienced what colonialism was, the kind of rigid socioracial hierarchies to which it led.

DS: That *Jamaica Journal* piece marks a kind of beginning of a line of criticism that you develop in a number of essays in the 1970s. And I want to come to these essays, but the essay also works through the metaphor of “connections”, if you remember. And I’m interested in some of the connections that you are establishing during these years. I’m especially interested in your connection to *Savacou*, and its critical project. When does this connection emerge, and what is it that you see in *Savacou*?

SW: Well, you might be able to help me better with dates.

DS: You are on the advisory board from the very beginning.

SW: From the very beginning, yes, yes. But do you remember what was the first date, when was that? Was it the sixties some time, late sixties?

DS: No, it was 1970.

SW: Seventy; I see, because I think Goveia’s brilliant article was published in 1970.<sup>54</sup> Yes, who are the people in *Savacou*? Remind me.

DS: Well, the founders of *Savacou* were of course Kamau Brathwaite, Andrew Salkey, John La Rose.

SW: That was in London?

DS: In London. Well, that was CAM [the Caribbean Artists Movement] in London, but by the time *Savacou* emerges as a journal Kamau has gone to teach in Jamaica.<sup>55</sup>

SW: And he was in charge of it? I see, yes, so it was Kamau. You see why I could never write an autobiography!

<sup>54</sup> The reference is to Elsa Goveia, “The Social Framework”, *Savacou* 2 (September 1970): 7–15.

<sup>55</sup> On the Caribbean Artists Movement see Edward Brathwaite, “The Caribbean Artists Movement”, *Caribbean Quarterly* 14 (1968): 57–59; and Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992).

DS: But what was it that attracted you to *Savacou*?

SMALL  
AXE

SW: You see, I've never really seen myself as an academic; I've always seen myself as a writer in the general sense of the term, and so for me to write for *Savacou* then was just part of the intellectual struggle of the time, the kind of writing that marked the difference between what it was to have been a "native" colonial subject and to no longer be. So I took for granted, I think, that I would have been a part of it. Because I remember that I was at the university, teaching there. And I was very unhappy, in that I had to keep rigidly to the teaching of the Golden Age literature of Spain, for which I had been appointed. This was because of the University of London curriculum model that UWI had adopted. So you can imagine that when I'm asked to come to the United States, the great temptation for me was that for the first time I was going to be able to teach and write together, to grapple every day with the key questions that I was trying to address in journals like *Savacou*.

DS: I want to come to your connection to Elsa Goveia. She is someone who, obviously, has been enormously inspiring to you. You have on more than one occasion taken that *Savacou* piece of hers, "The Social Framework", as the point of departure for what you have to say. And it's always been curious to me that Goveia's own participation in the radical debates in both *Savacou* and *New World Quarterly* has not been fully recognized. Tell me about Elsa Goveia and your relationship with her.

SW: Well, she was such a genuine person, such a first-rate intellectual. I remember her in London. She was a student when I was there, she was majoring in history, and I remember she was very brilliant, yet so modest. I had a very great admiration and respect for her. I've used her essay ["The Social Framework"] in almost all my classes. In that very short paper she opens for us the dimensions of the paradox that would come to constitute the central dilemma of independent Caribbean societies. This paradox was/is that while the black majority has now come to constitute the electoral majority as a result of the anticolonial struggle (so that we have democratized the society in its political aspects), nevertheless, the "ascriptions of race and wealth" still function to keep that electoral majority as the poorest, the least educated and the most stigmatized group of the society. Then she said something very interesting. She says, if as writers, as artists and as intellectuals we hope to be, not just secondary ones but to be fully creative ones, our job will be to ensure that the democratization effected at the level of the electoral process is effected also at the level of the social structure as well as at that of the economic system. Our job, she was saying, was to dismantle these ascriptions.

What Elsa is pointing to here is the fundamental contradiction of our democracy, one that makes it into a breadwinner-democracy ~ something like the democracy in [ancient] Greece which functioned on the basis of slavery. Now, the slaves did not exist there merely to do work. Their other *signifying* function was to serve as the living embodiment of what it was to be a *non-freeborn* Greek, as the deviant negation of what it is to be full, free and equal citizens, regardless of whether or not one was of *aristocratic* birth. This is the same with our breadwinner-democracy, which is not a democracy of human beings. It is a democracy only for those categories of people who attain to our present middle-class or bourgeois conception of being human. So, if you are a successful breadwinner, even if you have only a modest job, but with a regular salary, and are a taxpayer, you can exercise your rights as a citizen. But if you are jobless and poor, you see, I wonder if you can? Any more than the slave population could have done in the democracy of ancient Greece? So Goveia had put her finger on the postcolonial contradictions that we were just beginning to experience, that we continue to experience, that is taking an even more large-scale form in today's South Africa!

Then she had gone even further. Against the anthropologist M.G. Smith and his thesis with respect to the plural nature of Caribbean societies, which, he said, were held together only by their transactions in the economic market place,<sup>56</sup> she had said, yes, the societies in the Caribbean are indeed plural, seeing that Western colonialism has brought together different peoples with different cultures and religions. But, no, they are not *not* integrated, meeting only in the economic marketplace. Instead, she wrote, Caribbean societies are integrated on the basis of a single governing or status-ordering principle, which is internalized in the consciousness of all Caribbean peoples, including us blacks ourselves. And this ranking rule, as she calls it, is based on the belief that the fact of blackness is unalterably a fact of inferiority, as the fact of whiteness is one of superiority. The status-principle of the society is therefore based on the ascription of race, as well as of wealth, since the blacker you are, the poorer you are and the whiter you are, the richer you are. And even before Foucault, she is saying something that he will later also pick up on, elaborate. She's saying that we, as intellectuals, need to centre our struggles on an issue specific to us. Seeing that if we are to realize ourselves as first-rare artists, intellectuals and/or academics, we will have

56 M.G. Smith (1921–93) was a Jamaican poet and anthropologist. He is the author, most famously, of *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).



to put an end to trying to do our work on the basis of two conflicting premises. On the one hand, the egalitarian premise of one man/woman vote at the level of the political, while on the other, the premise of inequality, of dominance and subordination based on the ascriptions of race and wealth at the levels of the social and the economic structures. Premises that, I want to suggest here, still underlie our present order of knowledge.

DS: Are you saying that Goveia had a consciousness of a politics of knowledge?

SW: Yes. But in terms which arose out of the specificity of our own existential situation rather than out of that of Foucault's France. She was saying that we have a *vocational* interest as Caribbean intellectuals and artists in dismantling the race and wealth ascriptions that are indispensable to the production and reproduction of our present order of things, and therefore to our own *social* interest as normative middle-class members of this order. So that the choice of our *vocational* interests over our *social* interests would itself be, in Foucauldian terminology, a "politics of knowledge", a "politics of truth", choice.

DS: It is in her work in *Savacou* and to some extent in *New World Quarterly* that you get a sense of her oppositional sensibility, which is not a sensibility that often gets talked about. I remember Raymond Smith telling me about her passionate concern for what was happening in Guyana in the 1950s. But that side of Goveia is rarely talked about.

SW: Yes. I think what you might be suggesting is that we really haven't got a category for her because all of our categories of what it is to be radical take certain licensed heretical forms. She was very committed to the discipline of history. And I think that is where there would be a difference between herself and myself, in that I'm quite happy to move *across* disciplinary boundaries.

DS: But here again, Sylvia, in your admiration for Elsa Goveia is your admiration for someone who, like Mais and Lamming, was an embattled humanist, someone in a profoundly agonistic relationship with the aspiration to humanism.

SW: Exactly. That is why for her, there would be no simplistic easy radicalisms. You see, the issues we tackle always come from the existential situation that we find ourselves in. So here is Goveia, she is faced with the contradictions, the issues of the sixties, the early seventies. How is she going to respond to them? Because she is writing this essay in a university setting where a key contradiction has begun to emerge. Now, if I say something here, make a crucial point, I am not doing it merely

to shock. But the fact that I want us to look at here is the fact that the moment the British imperial flag came down in 1962, and the Jamaican flag went up in its place, the University of the West Indies, which was started in 1948, now finds itself occupying the hegemonic place that the British Raj had just vacated. Because what's happening now is that what had earlier been a hands-on direct political and militarily enforced imperialism, with its back-up ideology based on the premises of white superiority/black inferiority being carried by the curricula of the elementary and secondary school system, is now going to become a properly epistemological imperialism. Because by the time your colonizer flag goes down you have already trained your "natives". Trained them, as Sartre noted, in the Word that you own. So you will therefore continue to legitimate your dominance by means of your ruling ideas, even where cast now in new sanitized terms. So the academic system that you have gifted the "natives" with could seem, at first glance, to be merely a Trojan Horse! But note the paradox here. That Word, while an "imperializing Word", is also the enactment of the first purely de-godded, and therefore in this sense, emancipatory, conception of being human in the history of our species. And it is that discontinuity that is going to make the idea of laws of Nature, and with it the new order of cognition that is the natural sciences, possible. So there can be no going back to a before-that-Word. So as ex-native colonial subjects, except we train ourselves in the disciplinary structures to which that Word gives rise, undergo the rigorous apprenticeship that is going to be necessary for any eventual break with the system of knowledge which elaborates that Word, we can in no way find a way to think through, then beyond, its limits.

That is the point with Elsa Goveia. The transgressive theses she puts forward in her essay come directly out of her historical research on slave societies in the Caribbean. She could not have made these points on the basis of empirical data if she had not trained herself to be a proper historian, that is, in one of the disciplinary paradigms generated from that Word. You see what I'm trying to say? That's what I meant about utopian saltationism, when I said earlier that there can be no utopian saltationism, whether in politics or in epistemologies, that discontinuities can erupt only out of seedbeds that have been empirically pre-prepared for them.

This leads me to another point, a very slippery, difficult point to make. For what I'm going to suggest is that in the world in which we live today, it is not primarily the mode of production – capitalism – that controls us, although it controls us at the overtly empirical level through the institution of the free market system, and the everyday practices of its economic system. But you see, for these to function, the

processes of their functioning must be *discursively* instituted, regulated *and* at the same time normalized, legitimated. So what I am going to suggest is that what institutes, regulates, normalizes and legitimates, what then controls us, is instead the *economic* conception of the human – *Man* – that is produced by the disciplinary discourses of our now planetary system of academia as the first purely secular and operational public identity in human history. While this identity induces us all to behave as producers, traders or consumers, it unifies us as a species in *economically* rather than, as before, in *theologically* absolute terms. This means that in order to be unified in *economic* terms we have to first produce an *economic* conception of being human. Now, up until the end of the eighteenth century in the West, the conception was primarily *political*; up until the fifteenth century it was primarily *religious*. What I'm saying is that it is the bioeconomic conception of the human that we inscript and institute by means of our present disciplines and their epistemic order, as Foucault shows so incisively, that determines the hegemony of the *economic* system over the social and political systems – even more, that mandates the functioning of the capitalist mode of production as the everyday expression of that hegemony.<sup>57</sup>

Now, you might well see this as way out, off the wall! So let me make use of a parallel. This is that in the same way as in the feudal-Christian order of Europe only the feudal mode of production could have been able to provide the material conditions of existence for the production and reproduction of the then integrating theocentric conception of the human – as *Christian* – so it is only the capitalist mode of production that can produce and reproduce our present biocentric, and therefore *economic*, integrating conception of being human. That conception is *the* imperative. This is why, however much abundance we can produce, we cannot solve the problem of poverty and hunger. Since the goal of our mode of production is *not* to produce for human beings in general, it's to provide the material conditions of existence for the production and reproduction of our present conception of being human: to secure the well-being, therefore, of those of us, the global middle classes, who have managed to attain to its ethno-class criterion.

DS: You published another article in *Jamaica Journal* – to me, anyway, a very influential article – on Jonkunnu.<sup>58</sup> And here there is, unlike the earlier *Jamaica*

<sup>57</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Jonkunnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as Cultural Process", *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (June 1970): 34–48.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SYLVIA WYNTER

Sylvia Wynter and partner, Rome, 1950s

*Journal* piece, an effort toward a more *comprehensive* theorization of Caribbean cultural practice: the theory of the relationship between creolization and indigenization. Is there at this point for you, 1969, 1970, a self-consciousness of the need for a more all-embracing theory, a *general* theory, of Caribbean cultural process?

David  
Scott

SW: I don't think, looking back, that at the time it had seemed to me to be what I was doing. But that goal must have been there, somewhere. At that time that essay had come for me out of a moment of revelation. As you can see, it is not something written by an ethnologist. How I came to write it was that UNESCO had organized a conference on Caribbean folk dance. They invited me to make a presentation. The dominant conception of Jamaican folk dance was being put forward by Rex Nettleford and his NDTC [National Dance Theatre Company]. Now, I think that Rex is one of the most brilliant dancers I have ever seen, but I did not agree with the conceptualization of Jamaica's folk dances which he based his

choreography on. So I set out to write my paper with the idea that I was going to put forward an alternative conceptualization. That was my initial intention. As I got caught up in the project itself, that goal became secondary. What happened was that a young woman who helped me in the house, her name was Myrtle, came from Portland. Now, she had been a central figure in one of the Afro-Jamaican cults in Port

Antonio. She told me about the ceremonies in which she took part. In the same way as Bobby Hill has been opening up the underground imaginary out of which so many of the social and politico-religious movements in Jamaica were to come, so she opened up for me the realities of this underground alternative order of reality, of whose existence I had had no clue. It's true that growing up as a child and attending pocomania meetings I had come to know of its existence, but only in a superficial sense. We lived near a graveyard up in the hills because we lived near Irish Town, and there was a church, Creighton Church. Now, my children had gone up to the cemetery and taken something, I can't remember what it was, from one of the graves. Suddenly the bathroom door was locked shut from the inside and couldn't be opened! So Myrtle took the children with lighted candles in their hands and shepherded them up to the cemetery to take back what they had taken, to make apologies for having taken this object from the grave. So we are now touching on one of the cornerstone institutions of traditional African cultures, that is the burial/funeral ceremonies, and everything else related to that. Myrtle opened up that other world to me. And so I am realizing that what this scholar had found out in Haiti . . . what's his name?

DS: Jean Price-Mars?

SW: Price-Mars.<sup>59</sup> So I am discovering in Jamaica what he had discovered earlier in Haiti. And I am saying to myself what he had earlier said, that we have hitherto turned away in shame from our Haitian/our Jamaican folklore. But that in doing so, we are turning away from the evidence of the most moving history in the world, that of a people who, coming as chained slaves across the middle passage, in the worst possible conditions, had arrived in a strange land, and humanized its landscape by means of their transplanted folklore, in order to "snatch their place among men". So this was a moment of discovery. I think if you read it you can see that.

Now, as a result of that revelatory quality, a young man, Jim Nelson, a television producer, said to me after he had read it, "You have a play in this, write a play for television". And so I wrote a play, a Jonkunnu Christmas play called *Maskarade*, and Jim directed it on television for Christmas. That original version has been published as a play for schools as part of a collection.<sup>60</sup> Then several years later, Jim proposed

59 Jean Price-Mars (1876–1969), a Haitian scholar, was famously the author of *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* (*So Spoke the Uncle*), first published in 1928.

60 See Easton Lee, Sylvia Wynter, and Enid Chevannes, *West Indian Plays for Schools*, vol. 2 (Kingston: Jamaica Publishing House, 1979), 26–55.

that we do it as a stage play. So he wrote several scenes to expand it, as well as some new songs and music. Most of it was very good. It was staged in Kingston, then he took it to Cuba for Carifesta and it was well received. But then what happened was that he and I had a falling out over his characterization of one of the central figures, Miss Gatha, in the new scenes he had written, and which I had not seen before the play was staged. Now, you'll notice here that I was keeping the same central character, Miss Gatha . . .

DS: From *Hills of Hebron*, you mean.

SW: Yes. And I had originally modelled her on the majestic figure of Garvey's first wife, the pan-African anticolonialist activist Amy Ashwood Garvey, whom I had met in London as a student. This was a woman who enforced respect. Now in Jamaica, as you know, we have this long "yard" tradition of comic characters, and Jim wanted to make Miss Gatha a comic character, while I wanted to keep to the idea that, in a doubled manner, she also embodied, in addition to her everyday self, the African conception of the earth as a powerful sanction system, of an alternative sense of justice. So I didn't want to reduce her to a comic figure.

DS: But to come back to my question, though, which is that unlike the earlier *Jamaica Journal* essay, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together", which is a critical attempt to make a set of distinctions that might be productive in seeing something that we have not yet quite seen about the practice of criticism, in the "Jonkunnu" essay there is a *synthetic* theoretical project at work. You are working up a *general* theory of cultural process that is not there in the earlier work.

SW: Yes. Because what I had been trying to put forward in "We Must Learn to Sit Down" was the idea of a new form of critical discourse which would be transformative in its effect on the way we normally approach literary texts. But I agree with you that the "Jonkunnu" essay starts something new, pushed me towards what you identify as a "general theory".

DS: This points to yet another "connection" in your work, this time a very powerful connection to the work of Kamau Brathwaite.

SW: Indeed.

DS: In the early 1970s, there are a number of points at which your work and Kamau's intersect. There is a certain concern with the popular, with folk culture, as you both in fact call it. There is an attempt to shift away from a purely literary critical mode of operation to a much larger cultural critical mode. Indeed, there is an attempt to fold

the literary critical into the *cultural* critical. But also there is a desire to generate a *theory* of Caribbean cultural process. Are you self-conscious at the time of this intersection?

SMALL  
AXE

SW: There is a profound intersection. But also a difference, I think, between the concept of creolization he uses and mine.

DS: In fact, in his *Contradictory Omens*, which was published in 1974, Brathwaite salutes the “Jonkunnu” essay but argues that he has a slightly different conception of creolization. In his conception, creolization is itself an ambivalent process. There is both imitation/assimilation and resistance/creativity. He reads you as suggesting that creolization is the mode of assimilation, whereas the more radical mode of indigenization is that of creativity and resistance. But that double that you are reaching after he agrees with, only he thinks that that double itself characterizes creolization.<sup>61</sup>

SW: Well, it’s possible that he may be right, that what I made into a dichotomy might be a more complex process. Nevertheless, I also very much wanted to know, and still want to know, why there were and are these two cultural tendencies, a crossover one that can be adopted and taken up even into the topmost layers of society and then this other tenacious underground world that eventually surges up in Afro-popular music like ska, reggae, dub, in millenarian paintings like those of the Rastafari, in a world figure like the poet-prophet-singer Marley.

DS: One can see the intersection between your conceptualization and Kamau’s again in your plot/plantation piece in *Savacou* in 1971.<sup>62</sup> And part of what one senses in this work and the “Jonkunnu” piece is a concern to read against the totalizing hegemony of Europe’s implantation. To suggest that there was always a something else besides the dominant cultural logic going on, and that something else constituted another – but also a *transgressive* – ground of understanding. So that the plot is not simply a sociodemographic location but the site both of a form of life and of possible critical intervention.

SW: As you say so accurately, not just a sociodemographic location. You must remember now that all of our present thinking is usually carried out *aculturally* . . .

61. See Edvard [Kamau] Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Monte, Jamaica: Savacou, 1974), 15–16.

62. Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History: Plot and Plantation”, *Savacou* 5 (June 1971): 96–102.

DS: But, Sylvia, I want to keep you close to this notion, because part of what you're saying is that the plantation constituted – and this is part of your relationship to New World – a kind of *logic*, a kind of *dominant* logic.

SW: Exactly. It's a dominant *logic*, and it's a specific *cultural* logic, but it is also an ethical logic, a paradoxical *realpolitik* and a secular one that is in the process of emerging. It is this *reasons-of-state* ethic/logic that is going to bring in the modern world, what I call the millennium of Man. We have lived the millennium of Man in the last five hundred years; and as the West is inventing Man, the slave-plantation is a central part of the entire mechanism by means of which that logic is working its way out. But that logic is total now, because to be not-Man is to be not-quite-human. Yet that plot, that slave plot on which the slave grew food for his/her subsistence, carried over a millennially *other* conception of the human to that of Man's. The way the Jews carried over their Judaic conception of God into a Greco-Christian cum Judaeo-Christian Europe. So that plot exists as a threat. It speaks to other possibilities. And it is out of that plot that the new and now planetary-wide and popular musical humanism of our times is emerging.

DS: There is one final connection that I want to raise with you in this work of the late 1960s, early 1970s, and that is the obvious influence both of Adorno and of Walter Benjamin. What is it about their practice of criticism that you find particularly compelling?

SW: I think what I like about Adorno was that for the first time I was being introduced to a mode of thinking that was alien to my English university training. It's very difficult to break out of the American and English pragmatic, empirical way of thought because it so powerfully seems to relate to the everyday world in which you are living. And so, that is what Adorno made me begin to think about. The reality of our everyday world. To think about an alternative way of thinking about the real, how it is instituted, produced, rather than merely how it *is*. With Benjamin, the attraction was that he, more than Adorno, I think, lived the contradiction of his situation both as a European and a Jew.<sup>63</sup> As we live the contradiction of being both the West and not-the-West.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is impossible to characterize. His long-awaited *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999) has recently been published. For a useful account of his work see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).



DS: Sylvia, we are in the middle 1970s. And Jamaica is a much-transformed place, in many ways very different to the place that you returned to at the end of the 1950s and then in the early 1960s. What is your attitude at the time to the social and political changes that are taking place in the early to mid 1970s?

SW: I'm trying to remember. I know that from the processes that had been set afoot from the very origin of the independence movement we had sort of settled down on the political basis of two mass parties. So you had this phenomenon that had directly grown out of our situation, of a fairly steady pattern. Each party would be in for two terms then would be thrown out. And so, I remember, I never thought of thinking who was in power when I was going home; it didn't really much matter: it was something like Democrats and Republicans here in the US. There were great continuities, given the similarities of the demands that they had to respond to. The 1970s and certainly the advent of Michael Manley are very important. For example, if Vivian Blake had taken over the PNP instead of Michael, things would have gone very differently.<sup>64</sup> But I think that the advent of Michael Manley brought a rupture in that pattern, which of course I didn't sense at the time. I sensed a growing unease, I mean more than an unease, because you cannot really live in countries like ours with much ease. But what I am saying is that a pattern had been established – you knew what to expect – and this pattern comes to an end with the advent of Michael Manley. Had it been Viv Blake we would have continued on course much as Barbados did. But I think Michael Manley threw Jamaica off course and introduced a sharper quality of antagonism in the society by opening up the possibility of a Cuban-Castro type solution to Jamaican problems. The point is, you see, that as an ex-British colony, rather than an ex-Hispanic and reimperialized US semi-colony, like Cuba, we had been established, as we became a nation, on the basis of a liberal-capitalist democratic pattern. We had therefore lived an existential history quite different to that of Cuba. That is why Barbados is going to weather the oil crisis shocks of the seventies far better than we did. Unlike Jamaica, Barbados continued to work within the limits of the historical trajectory that was possible for it at that moment.

DS: But isn't there a tension, to call it no more than that, between the cultural politics of your insistence on a challenging criticism that opens the way to recognizing the

<sup>64</sup> Vivian Blake, attorney-at-law, was a prominent member of the PNP in the 1960s. In 1969, upon Norman Manley's retirement from leadership of the PNP he ran against Norman's son, Michael, for the position of party president, and lost.

counterdiscourse of the popular, on the one hand, and your argument, on the other, that a Viv Blake-led PNP in the 1970s would have established the kind of continuity with the colonial and immediate postcolonial state that you would endorse? Is there not a contradiction here?

SW: Not really. Not only was no real change effected by Manley's attempt at a utopian discontinuity based on the mimicry of Castro's model which had arisen out of *his* own existential historical situation but, unlike Barbados, we ended the decade in far worse shape than we had started out. While as far as the counterdiscourse of the popular is concerned, long before the advent of Manley it had begun to emerge in its own terms. Already in the early sixties there is the explosive emergence of its alternative cultural imaginary, while its music is going to be carried by the market forces of American capitalism as well as by its technological innovations, all over the globe. We are seeing, long before the advent of Michael Manley, the emergence of what is going to be ska and reggae, as the popular begins to separate itself from the national – to emerge in its *own* right. This process begins about 1962, *before* the advent of Michael Manley. But it's with his advent that you are going to have the deliberate *manipulation* of the popular, the attempt to make it a function of what is essentially a new class, or bureaucratic bid for state power. But the point I am trying to make is that the popular had already begun to emerge as a black diasporic and global rather than purely national current.

DS: One could say, of course, that there is a more sympathetic reading of at least the early Manley period, which would argue that there was perhaps manipulation indeed, and that manipulation is part of the nature of the two-party representative democracy that we have, but that one of the things that Michael Manley makes possible is the fuller emergence of the *values* of the popular into the public culture of Jamaican society.

SW: Yes, but as a new class form of pseudopopulism which co-opted the values of the popular to its own purposes. Since you have read my 1972 essay "One Love", you will see that already I had made the same critique. Since then I have given the name of "theoretical cannibalism" to this strategy. And this strategy is especially tempting to the new bureaucratic class, which Michael Manley represented, and which is our class. That is, we, the highly educated middle classes defined by our ownership of intellectual, rather than money, capital.

DS: Yes, I agree that is so, and I quite agree that the postcolonial state enables this class to exercise its hegemony on the public culture of Jamaican society. Had Viv Blake emerged, as you suggest, as leader of the PNP, there might have been greater

continuity with N.W. Manley's leadership of the party. But I want to press you on whether or not there isn't a *tension for you* between a criticism that recognizes and seeks in some way to enable the voice of the popular and a political vision that prefers the continuity with a political order that in many ways is holding that popular in a vice grip, to put it slightly polemically.

SW: A perceptive point, excellently put. First, let me say that the point of a *criticism* that seeks to enable the voice of the popular, of the liminal, to be heard is to suggest that that which holds the popular in a vice grip is not ultimately the political order. Rather, it is the epistemological order of which criticism is a part, the order which *mandates* the political order. In other words, the buck stops with us, as Foucault's agents, if hitherto non-consciously so, of power. But the second point that what we need to establish right away is our different *generational* standpoints. Were I you, and had I grown up in Jamaica when you did, I would have had no memory of the colonial state, of the anticolonial struggle, because one of the most extraordinary things is the way in which the entire anticolonial struggle all over the world and the vast dimensions of its impact, have been totally erased. So *you* have no continuity; in fact, you are now attempting to establish some kind of continuity through this interview. And so for *you*, Michael's coming and saying the things that he did resonated strongly. They sounded new. I would perhaps have responded to it in the same way had I not experienced my own political awakening during the anticolonial struggles. So we see the situation of the seventies from different generational perspectives. Yet let me say this, however: I rather suspect that at whatever period we found ourselves, somehow Michael Manley would always be on one side, and I on the other.<sup>65</sup>

DS: Your essay, "One Love", is published in this period.<sup>66</sup> In it, you talk about an emerging Afro-Jamaicanism. And you invoke Amiri Baraka's remarks about a frontier zone where an authentic black culture is preserved and which gives rise to black music. And you write, and I'm quoting, "the revindication of blackness, which is in a sense the revindication of the native, the revindication of the *humanness of man*, has taken place in the Caribbean each time that vast movements of social upheaval have put the

<sup>65</sup> It is not immaterial to remember that Wynter wrote a moving poetic tribute to N.W. Manley on the occasion of his death. See her "A Tribute to Manley: *Moritat* for a Lost Leader", *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 4 (December 1969): 2–6. The long poem is accompanied by a colour reproduction of Karl Parboosingh's well-known oil portrait, *Rt Excellent Norman Washington Manley*.

<sup>66</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "One Love – Rhetoric or Reality? Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism", *Caribbean Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 64–97.

articulate section of the population in touch with this frontier zone. However intuitively, however sketchily, however inadequately".<sup>67</sup> Is this what you are sensing about you in Jamaica?

David  
Scott

SW: In the seventies, it is the "frontier zone" that is erupting into the society, as it had begun to do from the sixties. So a counter-imaginary is beginning to impact on the larger society. Now, for an order to exist, what I call the articulate section of the population must be normally engaged in at once legitimating and establishing the categories in which this order sees itself and knows itself. This is a function of the articulate population, specifically of the intellectuals, in all human orders. But the way an order must know itself is in the adaptive terms that it needs to secure its own reproduction. So what this means is that normally the subjects of the order can never know the order as it really is. Rather, they must know it as it *needs to be known*, in order to secure its own existence. Second, if you are intellectuals and artists who belong to a subordinated group, you are necessarily going to be educated in the scholarly paradigms of the group who dominate you. But these paradigms, whatever their other emancipatory attributes, must have *always already* legitimated the subordination of your group. Must have even induced us to accept our subordination through the mediation of *their* imaginary. I think that it was something of that that Derek Walcott is getting at when he says, look, what was real to us was what we got through books, Wordsworth's daffodils and so on; these were real because of the work of the imagination, because of the printed page. *Our reality* was not real to us. The lignum vitae tree, the burning sun, the feel of it, didn't exist for us, imaginatively.

But that other reality was lived and imagined by those on the frontier zone, the zone that was the negation of the order of the printed page. And at the same time those who inhabited it were the negative antithesis, the deviants to the norm of that very order that you as an intellectual were being forced to articulate. Now, you can struggle to resolve that paradox, as Price-Mars did, or to manipulate it, as Duvalier did with vodun.

DS: Yes, but part of that articulate section of the population, as you call it, is *New World Quarterly*, *Savacou*, intellectuals like yourself who are recognizing the value and the possibility of a counter-zone in which there are values *other* than the values of dominant, Eurocentric Jamaican society. And this section of the population is coming into contact with the frontier zone of ska, Rastafari and so on.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 66.

SW: Yes. I like your stress on the word *other*. Rather than, say, *truer*. Because that saves us from the trap of the *Völkisch* cum Duvalierist temptation. So something important is happening with this encounter. However tentatively, we are beginning to initiate the *relativization* of the values we have been trained to articulate. And at the same time, they, the people of the frontier zone, are beginning to articulate this otherness themselves. So in ska, Rastafarianism, you are getting the articulation of a millenarian counter-order, explicitly so with the rise of Rastafari. Now, all millenarian movements arise to counter the established order. They are always Zions to Babylons. Some scholars call these “discontinuous revelations” as against the “continuous revelation” on which all human orders are founded and stabilized. And the Rastafarians were projecting this entire conception of a New Zion. As you go about your business, you see all these Rastafari paintings that I told you about, all around you on the streets, the sidewalks, you are seeing them there, you are hearing ska and reggae music all about you, the heavy dread beat of the bass. The daffodils have disappeared. That was an explosive moment of breakthrough to a new imaginary. A popular imaginary now, no longer a national one. But all this preceded the 1970s. *This is the point*. It is building up on its own momentum, in its very opposition to what we have now established as the national dynamics, the national state. Yet what we have to remember here is that it is the earlier struggle for the national state, for a national space, and the sharp contradictions to which that led, that had now made possible the new momentum of the popular whose thrust will become, and especially so with Bob Marley, global.

DS: At the same time in that article, you are suspicious of a certain inauthentic evocation of blackness – “blackism”, as you call it. Does the danger of blackism, or the revindication of a black mystique, signal an important shift in the terms of cultural struggle in the 1970s? That is to say, in the 1960s, the danger may not have appeared to be the problem of a black mystique but the problem of a certain hegemonic Eurocentrism. Whereas in the 1970s the terms of cultural struggle have shifted and now the profound danger, or *one* profound danger, has to do with what you call blackism. Can you elaborate?

SW: That’s a key question. You see, for me, what I call blackism is a form of Duvalierism. And in Haiti what did Duvalier do? Against the brown caste ruling elite who used their greater quotient of “white blood” and their non-blackness, to legitimate their dominance, the educated black elites which Duvalier belonged to, would not only deploy the sign of their blackness as a countersign. In addition, they

were to manipulate the symbols of the neo-African religion of vodun in order to displace the ruling brown elite with their ruling black elite. Blackism, like brownism, is therefore a weapon in the struggle for hegemony *between* members of the educated middle classes. So this was the same thing that I saw was happening in Jamaica in 1972 when I wrote the essay “One Love”. At least this was how it appeared to me. You see, you must remember that when I was a child growing up, Michael Manley and I would never have lived in the same world. Not because I was poor and he was not; rather, because on the colour scale I was too dark. Now, I would have been sort of in the middle, but you have to understand that someone like Michael Manley and his family represents what embodies the norm of a ranking-rule even more rigorous than that of the colour line. They represented what the WASPs represent in the United States.<sup>68</sup> We tend to forget that in an ex-British colony like Jamaica, hegemony was not merely defined by the colour *white* but rather by the entire WASP/English complex. Only *its* style of life, *its* mode of being, was truly normative. So you can imagine how it would have seemed to me when suddenly Michael Manley has begun to manipulate the symbols of Rastafari – the emperor of Ethiopia, he said, had given him a correcting rod with which to sweep his JLP opponents out of office! So to me, then, he is manipulating the very sign that functions in Jamaica as the liminally deviant sign to that of WASPness. This is when the movement of neo-Duvalieriste bourgeois blackism that I write about in the essay first emerged fully in Jamaica.

DS: Sylvia, you leave Jamaica in 1974, I believe. If I may ask, what prompts this?

SW: It's very interesting. I often wonder about the way one's life works itself out. In London, in 1960–61, I felt I must come back because we were becoming independent so I've got to do something, help build. So I go to Guyana, then to Jamaica, and I genuinely never thought I would ever leave it again. Then this black civil rights struggle, the whole black movement against segregation and so on, explodes in the United States. Then in its wake, a plurality of the movements springing up spontaneously, and a profound intellectual questioning begins to take shape in the United States. All the questions I had been pursuing, such as the *why* of Goveia's “ranking rule”, now took centre stage. So I was invited to conferences being held here [in the United States]. I remember my first conference was at the State University of

68 WASP: the acronym stands for White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.

New York, Binghamton. That was the first conference that had been held in modern times on the idea of Africa and the African diaspora. From that I was invited to other conferences, then asked by the University of Michigan to give a graduate seminar there on literature and society in the Third World. I remember that I also gave a lecture or two on the emergence of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, but in general we examined the written modern literature that had emerged in the Third World. We attempted to identify the major thematics, their parallels and divergences in the context of the relation of their societies to the dominant First World of the West. It was a wonderful experience. At the University of the West Indies I had never had the freedom to do that kind of thinking as part of my everyday academic work.

DS: Which is the first university that you come to in the US?

SW: The University of Michigan. I came for a quarter. I think that would have been in 1971–72 or thereabouts. I know it's in the early 1970s because I left Jamaica in 1974.

DS: And then you go from Michigan back to Jamaica?

SW: I go back to Jamaica. But then, as a result of that, I got several offers to teach in the US. One was from the University of California, San Diego [UCSD]. They were in the process of setting up a programme, "Literature and Society in the Third World", and they brought me here. The black American woman writer Sherley Anne Williams was head of the new programme. She was part of the then "Third World" group that had thought it up.

DS: Was Frederic Jameson involved at that time?<sup>69</sup>

SW: Jameson was there, as well as many other outstanding literary critics, either there or coming as Visiting Professors. UCSD had a very vibrant Department of Literature at that time; it was at the peak of its fame. Jameson was a truly stimulating influence, and a very helpful colleague. We were able to work with an excellent set of graduate students. That was going to be a wonderful period for me. The intellectual questioning of the sixties was still there, though it was to as quickly disappear. But in that hiatus, I was now able to design new courses to address the questions that I had no space in my teaching at UWI to address. That really began a new phase in my life.

<sup>69</sup> Frederic Jameson is an influential Marxist cultural critic. Among his many books are *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), and, most recently, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1998).

DS: By the middle to late 1970s there is a very clear shift taking place in your thought. On the one hand, the Caribbean seems less and less the specific focus of explicit concern and more an instance of a larger problem; and on the other, the historical canvas on which your argument is being laid out is considerably deepened. Before we get to the positive character of that project, tell me if you can what it was that shaped your dissatisfaction with your approach to, or your understanding of, culture and society?

SW: I would say, coming to the United States, coming to UCSD, I began to learn something of the complexity of the society of the United States itself. Above all, I began to experience the entirely different nature of what it is to be something called “black” in this society, as distinct from in Jamaica, in the Caribbean. Because, you see, in Jamaica, for the Rastafarians, for example, blackness is a sign that they must constantly resemanticize/revalue. But the negation of their human dignity is not just because of their blackness. It is also because of their jobless status, their institutional poverty and joblessness, their always-discriminated-against deviant status. The fact that as they assert themselves with their revalued symbols they become the objects of suspicion to the police, who, although black themselves, were always anxious to secure their middle-class status by putting visible distance between themselves and the black and poor Other of the Rastafari. In Jamaica, middle classness cancels out the negativity of the sign of blackness. But in the US this is not so. As Fanon noted, in the US, the black American never ceases to find himself or herself contested. *That* is what I came to experience: the fact that the United States is itself based on the insistent negation of black identity, the obsessive hypervaluation of being white. For being American in post-Civil War US is being white, being above all, *not-black*. The totality of this negation was something new to me! While in Jamaica, being middle class or being brown-black offers escape hatches, in the US there is no escape-hatch from the metaphysical burden of being black. And note that *black* means to be of African descent, *whether you are mixed or unmixed*. That is what makes it a *cultural* value category. While to be *white* means you must be of Indo-European descent and be unmixed, be “pure”, without “taint” of “Negro blood”. But these are cultural categories which both groups are institutionally made to experience as if they were, indeed, biological ones.



## HISTORY IN THE AGE OF MAN

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DS: I now want to come to the conception of history that is part and parcel of your current work, and which one begins to see emerging at the end of the 1970s, and through the 1980s. In this conception history is organized, much as Michel Foucault suggests, as a series of epistemic breaks, or mutations, beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Can you tell me, in sort of outline, what this conception of historical breaks is and also what its *significance* is?

SW: Well, I mentioned earlier that I felt that when Lloyd Best came up with the idea that we should begin a line of inquiry which began with the plantation system established in the Caribbean from the early decades of the sixteenth century, then think through the complex of categories that had arisen from the terms on which it had been initially instituted, I have always regretted that we didn't find a way to make that happen. Perhaps it couldn't have happened then. But coming to teach in the US and being able to teach courses which had to do with the Caribbean as a whole, the black African diaspora as a whole, even, at the beginning, the Third World as a whole, I found that I was now going to be forced to begin to rethink the origins of the modern world and, with it, the origins of different categories of people. For these categories had not existed before the West's global expansion and its forcible incorporation of the peoples and cultures it met up with into its own now secularizing Judaeo-Christian cultural field. So now we see these categories emerging that had never existed before – whites who see themselves as “true” men, “true” women, while their Others, the “untrue” men/women, were now labelled as *indios/indias* (Indians) and as *negros/negras*. For what we must also note here, is that at the beginning of the modern world, the only *women* were white and Western. Enslaved African women were classified and instituted as *negras*, the feminine form of *negros*. The same with the indigenous women of the Caribbean and the Americas who were classified as *indias*, the feminine form of *indios*. So then you had true women on one side, the women of the settler population. and on the other you had *Indianwomen* and *Negrowomen*. Then, with the second wave of late eighteenth century and nineteenth century imperialism, you now had the *true* women of the colonizer/settlers on the one hand, and *nativewomen* on the other. You see, I am suggesting that from the very origin of the modern world, of the Western world system, there were never simply “men” and “women”. Rather there was, on the one hand, Man, as invented in the sixteenth century by Europe, as Foucault notes, and then, on the other hand, Man's human Others, as also invented by Europeans at the same time, as the anthropologist Jacob

Pandian points out.<sup>70</sup> So my periodization of history would begin with the origin of the modern world, would begin with an origin based on the emergence of those categories, with their invention by the West. Yet to put forward such a periodization, I would also have to begin by asking myself: What had been the nature of the vast change by which Latin Christian Europe, a religious entity, had come to reinvent itself as the secular West? What was it that had led to, then enabled, the sustained dynamic of the brilliant intellectual breakthroughs by means of which these people had gone on to take over the world, drawing all the rest of us willy-nilly into a new order that they still continue to define, categorize and, indeed, to control? What was it that they had done differently from all other human groups? That was a very important shift. Because you move beyond *resentment*, beyond a feeling of anger at the thought of how much the population to which you belong has been made to pay for their rise to world dominance, and instead you ask: How did they do it? Because, if *they* did it, how can *we*, the non-West, the always native Other to the true human of their Man, set out to transform, in our turn, a world in which we must all remain always somewhat Other to the “true” human in their terms?

So the dilemma you confront here is that if you are to *transform* their world, you will have to be first able to appreciate the dimension of the kind of intellectual breakthroughs that they must have made to bring it into existence. Then you see that what is usually taught in literary courses in school and university under the name of Renaissance humanism is only a very partial aspect, and was not what that movement had been fundamentally about at all. For what Renaissance humanism was to effect was an extraordinary rupture at the level of the human species as a whole. I have dealt with the nature of this epochal break in some of my recent essays.<sup>71</sup> But in addition, some innovative work now being done by archaeo-astronomers is also beginning to throw light on what the nature of this shift was. What they have proved is that in every human order, from the smallest hunter-gatherer groups one can imagine, to those of large-scale civilizations such as that of Egypt and China, all had mapped the structuring principle of their societies, onto the heavenly bodies, onto the regularities of their movements. And they did that so that in that way they could supernaturally

70 See Jacob Pandian, *Anthropology and the Western Tradition: Towards an Authentic Anthropology* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1985).

71 These essays include “Columbus and the Poetics of the *Propter Nos*”, *Annals of Scholarship* 8, no. 2 (1991): 251–86 (special issue, “Discovering Columbus” edited by Djelal Kadir), and “Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables that Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters”, in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding and Textuality*, ed. Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

guarantee and mandate the ostensibly extra-humanly structuring principles that they themselves had invented.<sup>72</sup> With the result that all such astronomies, however sophisticated, were necessarily ethnoastronomies.

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This included Greek astronomy which Christian medieval Europe had inherited. Since in spite of all its breakthroughs up to and including Ptolemy, the pre-analytic premise of a value divide between heaven and earth had been maintained. This was the same divide on which Latin-Christian Europe would map its own structuring spirit/flesh principle. So the Redeemed Spirit is mapped onto the incorruptible heavens, onto their celestial realm, while the Fallen Flesh is mapped onto the earth or terrestrial realm. As the abode of fallen mankind, the earth *has to be* fixed and non-moving at the centre of the universe, as its dregs. So it's this value division, between spirit/flesh, heaven and earth, that is the structuring principle about which the society of medieval Europe will organize itself in order to represent itself as if it were supernaturally ordered. And it is this belief system that Copernicus is going to shatter with his thesis that the earth also moved about the heavens. This was the shattering that was to make possible, eventually, the rise of a scientific astronomy, then, gradually, of the natural sciences.

So how did this happen? Several scholars have shown that Copernicus's breakthrough could only have been made in the wake of the earlier humanists' invention of a revalorized natural Man in the place of Christianity's fallen creature. So now it is Man as a subject for whose existence the earth will no longer have to be known as his non-moving degraded fallen abode. This is the break that Foucault refers to when he wrote of Western Europe's invention of Man in the sixteenth century. But that was not all there was to it. As Pandian reminds us, the West was to be able to reinvent its *true Christian self* as that of Man only because, at the same time, Western discourses, such as that of anthropology, were also inventing the *untrue Other* of the Christian self, as that of Man's human Others. So *indios/indias/Indians* in the *encomienda* neo-serf labour institution and *negros/negras/Negroes* in the plantation slave labour institution were now to be classified, in Western terms, as *the* human Others to the West's self-conception in the terms of Man as a rational being and political subject. However, the rational/irrational structuring principle of the postmedieval order of the state

72 The reference here is to Edwin C. Krupp, *Skywatchers, Shamans, and Kings: Astronomy and the Archaeology of Power* (New York: Wiley, 1979).

could not be mapped any longer on the physical cosmos. So it is mapped instead on the value divide projected as existing between rational humans and non-rational animals. Then along comes the Darwinian revolution, with its new half-scientific, half-mythic Origin Narrative of Evolution, and sweeps away this value difference between humans and animals. It is in the wake of this that bourgeois intellectuals are going to redefine Man in purely secular, because biological, terms. By placing human origins *totally* in evolution and natural selection, they are going to be able to map the structuring principle of their now bourgeois social structure, that of the *selected* versus *dysselected*, the *evolved* versus *non-evolved*, on the only still extra-humanly determined order of difference which was left available in the wake of the rise of the physical and, after Darwin, of the biological, sciences. This is the difference that was provided by the human hereditary variations which we classify as *races*. This is where Du Bois's colour line comes in. And while it is drawn between the Indo-European somatotype, on the one hand, and the Bantu-African somatotype on the other, all other non-white groups will be co-classified with the latter, if to less extreme and varying degrees.

So what we are going to find now is that it is the category of "natives" and "niggers" that will be made to function as the embodiment of the human Other to this now purely biologized and bourgeois conception of the human. Now, this is very, very important, the recognition that our Otherness creates not so much a white identity as a bourgeois identity, with *whiteness* serving, together with *non-whiteness* and *blackness*, as a part of totemic signifying complex. But as one whose indispensable function is to suggest that the value difference between (bourgeois) Man and its working-class Others is as supraculturally and extra-humanly ordained as is the projected value difference between Indo-European peoples and all native peoples, at its most total, between white and black.

DS: So there is, Sylvia, an initial break through which the modern world emerges. And that break has in part to do with a shift from a theocentricity to an emerging secular conception, and a secular conception which is also the emergence of the modern political subject.

SW: Yes, precisely. This is all going to be entirely new, in that before the initial break, you have in Europe a theocentric conception of the human which is sustained by the order of knowledge centred on a discourse of theological absolutism.

DS: Which characterizes not simply Europe.

SW: Yes, every society that has ever existed, if in differing forms. So one can speak in general terms of a supernatural absolutism, whether of polytheistic ancestors or of monotheism's single and absolute God(s). So here we are beginning to approach a history of the human itself. That is why the rupture that now occurs takes place both in the context of the local history of the West as well as in that of the species itself. For this rupture is that of the *desupernaturalizing* of our modes of being human.

DS: The "de-godding" of the world, as you've also put it.

SW: Yes, the de-godding of the world. I use that term, or the term *desupernaturalizing*, in order to move outside the term *secular*, which is itself a Judaeo-Christian cultural term. *Secular* means to be inside post-Adamic fallen time, as against eternal time, which was conceived as the only *real* time. That was why, in the terms of the medieval scholastic order of knowledge, access to truth could only be had through the theologically absolute paradigms, yet it was these very paradigms that served to legitimate the hegemony of the church over the lay world of the state, and of the clergy intelligentsia over the lay intelligentsia. So if you were a lay intellectual, however accomplished a scholar you were, you had to think in paradigms which served to confirm the hegemony of the church over the lay world. So this is why the rise of the modern European state and its challenge to the hegemony of the church will be linked to the new civic humanist paradigms of political thinkers like Machiavelli and others, since what they do is to go back to Greco-Roman thought in order to define the political subject of the state *outside* the terms of theology, and thereby to invent political Man. This invention of Man, by the way, is what the artists and the writers of the sixteenth century are also doing. When you read Cervantes, when you read Shakespeare, it is not, as Bloom says, the invention of the human that is at issue.<sup>73</sup> It is the invention of the first de-godded Man that we are seeing in Prospero, and in Caliban who is his Other.

Let us hold onto the Prospero/Caliban dramatic figures for a minute, then relate them to Pandian's Man/human Others real-life referents; that is, to European settlers on the one hand then Indians and Negroes on the other. Now, let us focus on a key point made by Jean-François Lyotard in his recent essay *Heidegger and the Jews*. It is not, Lyotard tells us, as men, women and children that the Jews of Europe were

73 The reference is to Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

almost exterminated by the Nazis. It was as “the name of what is evil”.<sup>74</sup> Now, let us link that to Aimé Césaire’s point in *Discourse on Colonialism* where he says that the shock with the Holocaust is that the victims were white. He says that, in effect, before the Holocaust, the same exterminations had been carried out against non-white natives, that the “name of what is evil”, in the purely biological terms used by the Nazis, had been put in place in its matrix form *outside* Europe. From there it had boomeranged back to Europe itself.

DS: At the end of the blind alley that is Europe, there is Hitler.<sup>75</sup>

SW: At the end of the blind alley, there is Hitler. So let us look again at Lyotard’s concept of “the name of what is evil”, so as to reinforce the periodization that I am trying to put forward. Now, if we go back to the medieval order of Latin Christian Europe, we find it is the Jews who are made to embody the fundamental “name of what is evil” in Christianity’s conception. In this conception, the Jew is the deicide, the Christ-killer, the obdurate Christ-refuser. So in times of crisis, it is the Jew who is massacred. For in that medieval-aristocratic world, in its theological conception of the human, the Jew is the liminally deviant figure, the scapegoat. Then, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, as the state centralizes itself, working in tandem with the church, the true political subject of the state is identified as the Spaniard of Spanish-Christian hereditary descent. So the Jewish convert, like the Moorish converts (or *conversos*) to Christianity, is now classified at one and the same time as a potentially “unclean” Christian and un-Spanish political subject. Both now come to embody the “name of what is evil” inside monarchical Iberian Europe. Outside Europe, at the same time, however, a more global “name of what is evil” is being put in place: Caliban is its dramatic projection. The “Indians” in the *encomienda*, the “Negroes” in the slave plantation are its real-life referent – as will be the Mad in Europe. No longer in theological terms but in secular politico-juridical terms. So Indians and Negroes are expropriated and enslaved, while in Europe, the Mad are interned, not as men, women and children but as the embodiment of the by-nature-irrational “name of what is evil”. For the first two are now seeable as justly

74 See Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and the Jews*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

75 The paraphrase is from Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 15. The famous passage reads: “Whether one likes it or not, at the end of the blind alley that is Europe, I mean the Europe of Adenauer, Schuman, Bidault, and a few others, there is Hider. At the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day, there is Hitler. At the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler.”

mastered by the “by nature” rational European settler, the third as justly interned by the normally rational.

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What I want us to hold onto here is that while the characteristic of being of Jewish or Moorish creedal descent inside Europe, or being of non-European descent outside Europe, is a signifier: what is being signified in both cases, as in the case of the Mad, is the “name of what is evil”. So that when in the nineteenth century the characteristic of blackness, of non-whiteness as well as the characteristic of Jewishness, now, in terms of their ostensibly Afro-Asian mongrel breed descent, what is being constituted here is a now purely biological, *non-theological* name of what is evil. So what does this mean? This means that although we, too, as blacks/niggers, or non-white natives, like the Jew inside Nazi Germany, have been made to institutionally embody the new biological name of what is evil, we are not going to be able to reduce that “name of what is evil” to ourselves – even though we will always be tempted to. But if we look at the Holocaust and see that the Jews were exterminated, as Lyotard says, as the embodiment, in its extreme form, of the category “life unworthy of life”, we can then see why other “undermen” such as Gypsies, Slavs, Poles, homosexuals, the handicapped, mentally ill, and so on, were also exterminated. And this was so even though the most totally “unworthy” remained the “Jew”, as in the US the most totally “unworthy” remains the black. So what I want us to hold onto here, above all else, is the following fact: that to think the name of what is evil in *biological* terms, whether in the terms of the Nazi’s “life unworthy of life” or, as in the recent terms of the bell curve, as that of “dysgenic humans” (a category comprised in the US of blacks, Latinos, Indians as well as the transracial group of the poor, the jobless, the homeless, the incarcerated), you are only able to do so *within* the hegemonic terms of our present biocentric and bourgeois conception of what it is to be human, of *its* “name of what is good”.

DS: But back up, though, because there emerges in the sixteenth century a certain kind of secularization, right? That secularization is not yet biocentric.

SW: No! Very good. Not yet.

DS: That secularization rests on what you call a different code than the cosmological, the theocentric. What is that code that emerges then, and how does that code itself become transformed into the code of race-biocentricity of the nineteenth century?

SW: Okay. Remember that the organizing principle of medieval society had been the spirit/flesh code, the clergy/laity code – and Jacques Le Goff’s book *The Medieval Imagination* brilliantly captures that.<sup>76</sup> The clergy, because celibate and freed from

Adamic sin, actualizes the Redeemed Spirit, as does the church. The laity, married men and women, actualized the Fallen Flesh, as does the state. So now, for the state to become hegemonic, for the theological absolutism of the discourse which legitimates the hegemony of the church/clergy to be replaced, eventually, by the political absolutism of a Hobbesian-type discourse, for a Prospero and a Caliban to be made possible, there *has* to be a shift out of the theocentric mode of being human and, therefore, out of what N.J. Girardot identifies as the “formulation of a general order of existence” that is common to all religions. Now, all such formulations, Girardot says, are based on a postulate of “significant ill”, that can only be cured by the “plan of salvation”, of the ultimate goal able to effect that “cure”.<sup>77</sup> That is, as long as you follow the behaviours that the plan of salvation of the specific religion prescribes. So what we are dealing with here are behaviour programming (because behaviour motivating and demotivating) schemas. And because the “significant ill” of the Judaeo-Christian religion was that of original sin, with the cure only made possible by the medieval subject’s following the plan of salvation prescribed by the church/clergy, and by his or her striving to attain to the ultimate *other-worldly* goal of eternal salvation in the City of God, the *civitas dei*, there would have been no way whatsoever within the terms of that formulation that the lay world and the state could *not* have found themselves subordinated to the world of the church/clergy. It was all sewn up! So what are we going to see here? We are going to see that as the condition of that first epochal break there is going to be a reformulation of the Judaeo-Christian formulation, a shift from the ultimate goal of attaining to the *civitas dei*, the City of God, to that of attaining to the this-worldly goal of the *civitas secularis*, the secular city. That is the goal now of securing the stability, order and territorial expansion of the state, in a competitive rivalry with other Christian European states. So you are now primarily a political subject of the state; you are not, as before, primarily a religious subject of the church. The anxiety of the “significant ill” that you experience, therefore, is now not so much that of your being enslaved to original sin. Your anxiety now is that of being enslaved to the irrational aspects of your “state of nature”, human nature. The plan of salvation able to cure that “significant ill” now calls for you to behave according to the laws of the state, to put the common good of the state, its order and stability, over your private good. Just as Prospero does when he represses his

76 Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. A. Godhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

77 See N.J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).



anger and seeks to restore the threatened order of the state rather than to give in to his “irrational” particularistic passion for revenge. Yet the paradox to note here is that it is that very “common good” of the state that will call for the expropriation/enslavement of Caliban. And that reasons-of-state behavioural imperative and ethic is going to be hegemonic until the end of the eighteenth century. This is because the code now is rational/irrational, in place of that of spirit/flesh. Since, in the terms of the new reformulation, while we are still created by God, Nature has begun to take centre-stage as God’s agent on earth. As He recedes into the distance, the pre-Darwinian discourse of natural theology serves to hold the religio-secular contradiction together!

However, what we must emphasize here is that in the terms of that reasons-of-state code, while the Negro-as-slave is projected as the missing link between rational humans and irrational animals, the “ill”, the “name of what is evil” is still that of a negative degree of rationality, not yet that of a negative degree of being human. To be the “name of what is evil” is to be *subrational*, not yet to be *subhuman*. So it will only be with the shift in the nineteenth century that we would come to experience ourselves in the terms of the bourgeois Origin Narrative of Evolution and natural selection, and therefore come to be able to think that there *can* be humans who can be not *quite* human. So it is only this new biological conception of being human that would make it possible for us to think “the name of what is evil” as that of being *dysgenic*, that is, in terms of a “significant ill” defined as that of dysgenicity or of “life unworthy of life”. This is not arbitrary. The new code is now that of eugenic/dysgenic, selected/dysselected, in the place of the earlier rational/irrational as well as of that of the spirit/flesh. And this new code, and the reformulation from which it comes, will serve to legitimate the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie as a ruling group, in the same way as the rational/irrational code had legitimated that of the landed gentry, the owners of landed wealth, who in the Americas, the Caribbean, were also the owners of plantations, of slaves.

Why, then, you will ask, specifically eugenic/dysgenic? Because it is the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie, from Adam Smith and Malthus to Darwin and Ricardo, that will spearhead the second intellectual revolution of humanism, this time a bioeconomic or liberal humanism. Now, this is so because the bourgeoisie, as a ruling group, can in no way base its claim to rule, as all other such groups before had done, on its nobility of blood, birth, and line of descent. So it is going to effect a mutation, to base its claim, after Darwin, on its bioevolutionary or selected eugenic line of descent. So we are now moving from rational/irrational to

evolved/non-evolved, selected/dysselected. And here we come to the crux of the matter. This code is going to be mapped upon the extra-humanly determined difference of somatypes between what Du Bois calls the “lighter and the darker races”, or the colour line. So this will be enacted as a code, not only as between white and black in the apartheid systems of the US and of South Africa, but also in the colonizer/colonized or the settler/native dichotomous relation all over the world. *All* over the world. Then it will return to Europe, to be enacted in its extreme form as a relation of dominance/subordination between, on the one hand, the Aryan master race and its “life unworthy of life” others, on the other.

DS: And *this*, for you, is the moment when *race* comes to be the code through which one not simply *knows* what human being is, but *experiences* being.

SW: Very well put. Had I been a European who lived in the Middle Ages I would have *experienced* myself in the theological terms of being a true Christian. I would not have experienced myself in biological terms as I now do.

DS: I want to bring back the question of gender here, because you often appear in responding to criticisms of you regarding gender, feminist criticisms of you, by suggesting that gender ought to be seen *strategically* as subordinate in the course of cultural-political struggles. But one has the sense, reading you and listening to you, that the issue is not so much a strategic question of the subordinate place of the concept of gender but that race has a fundamental priority *because* of the place of race in the epistemic break that you point to. So that there is a *foundational* epistemological priority of race *vis-à-vis* gender.

SW: Exactly. And I think there are three points I want to make here. I want us to go back to Lyotard’s concept of “the name of what is evil”. Now, “the name of what is evil” is inseparable from “the name of what is good”. So I’m going to suggest that what we are dealing with here is an object of knowledge that can in no way normally exist within the ground or regime of truth of our present epistemological order. Now, this new object that I have adapted from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is one that I call the governing *sociogenic principle* – but let us call it, for the moment, the master code of symbolic life and death. For what I’m suggesting here is that it is this principle/code that is constitutive of the multiple and varying *genres* of the human in the terms of which we can alone *experience ourselves as human*. But let’s come back to gender. Gender functioned as an emancipatory opening for me. Because for a long while the debate had become sterile. It was either race first or class first. We were stuck. There was no opening. Then with the sixties’ movements, the rise of feminism,

whose dominant vanguard was going to be Euro-American – especially professional – women, not married women who depend on their husbands but *professional* women, something new came into the picture. For here was a group of women who, while privileged like their male peers in terms of race and class, experienced the anomaly of their gender dysprivilege *vis-à-vis* these male peers, and especially so with respect to their professional careers, with such sharpness, that they would blow the race/class, either/or wide open. Note the paradox: Because they could experience the issue of gender from their already privileged perspective as an urgent and unique issue, they introduced an entirely new opening.

So they created the concept of patriarchy. Now, patriarchy is, of course, a theoretical fiction, but it is saying something crucial. It is saying that it is not just a matter of the mode of economic production, as Marxists would have it. Rather, it is a matter of the production of the contemporary social order itself, and in the specific way which called for gender roles in which being male, *vis-à-vis* being *female*, was already privileged. So that original moment of feminism, as it emerged in the opening provided it by the black, non-white and other social protest movements of the sixties, held a tremendously transformative promise. For as feminist theorists began to elaborate this construct *patriarchy*, they had begun to point to the phenomenon that the anthropologist Godelier only recently identified.<sup>78</sup> This is that while it is we humans who ourselves produce our social orders, and are in reality its authors and its agents, we also produce, at the same time, the mechanisms of occultation which serve to keep this fact opaque to ourselves. So why these mechanisms? So that we can continue to attribute the authorship of our societies, its role allocations, its social hierarchies and divisions of labours, and inequalities to “imaginary beings” such as the ancestors, the gods, God. That we can represent them, in other words, as extra-humanly or supernaturally mandated. But this has been no less the case with our now purely secular case, since we attribute what we now invent and institute to the “imaginary being” of evolution/natural selection as the ostensibly direct agent/author of the structures/roles of our contemporary bourgeois order of things. Think of it! As if in the millions of years of evolution’s functioning, an agency called natural selection had had nothing better to do than to mandate the supposed bell curve on which this order is imagined to be, supraculturally, built!

78 See Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

So, what the feminists were now doing as they elaborated their construct of patriarchy was that they were refusing our collective projection of agency and authorship to imaginary beings. They are saying, No! Patriarchy is an invention of men. So they are revealing *one* of the mechanisms of occultation, the one which has to do with gender roles by means of which we hide from ourselves the fact that it is we ourselves, *all of us* and not only men, who individually and collectively institute and keep in being not only gender but all such roles!

This was the opening that the feminists made in their original creative sixties' phase. In fact, even before the sixties' feminist movement, if you go back and read that powerful 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf, you can see that it is this Godelier-type issue, as it applies to gender roles, that she is already opening.

So how did I come to be able to enter through that opening, to take advantage of that breach? In the early eighties I spent a year on a fellowship at the National Endowment for the Humanities Center at Research Park Triangle, North Carolina. The project I was to work on was a book in which I wanted to bring together the vast material I had collected on the representations of black peoples in European literature and thought from the Middle Ages until today. That was what I started out doing at the centre. But that year there were quite a few feminists there. Now, as we interacted intellectually, I began to be struck by the fact that the terms in which these highly privileged women were being negated, that is, their stigmatization as being *intellectually deficient* compared to men, were the *same* terms in which black people in general were being negated, if far more totally so in our case. Indeed, in which the working class is also negated! So I began to ask, Why this similarity? And why these *specific* terms? What systemic function did they, do they, serve? Seeking the answer to that question would determine everything I would write from then on. So as you can see, there was never any hostility on my part to feminism as it erupted in its original creative phase. I welcomed the opening they had brought. Especially the fact that in order to understand the role of gender relations they had to go back to the very origin of human societies, thereby opening a new frontier onto our self-knowledge as human beings. And in that aspect I was to follow in their footsteps. The difference between us, however, is that they would continue to see gender as a supracultural phenomenon, and therefore as a universal whose terms could be the same for all human groups. This led them to base their theories on a category mistake, to take a member of the class, gender roles, as if it were *the* class itself. With the result that by means of this strategy they were able to make an issue specific to the already highly privileged members of our society, that is to white and non-white middle class, largely

professional women, as if this issue were both either fully equitable *with* or hegemonic *over* the issues specific to the vast majority of the more extremely underprivileged members of society! Yet the moment that you look at it from the perspective of that vast majority, you can recognize that the phenomenon of gender, while a foundational archetype unique to our situation as humans, nevertheless is itself only *one* member of a class, a class of *something else*. So what was/is this something else, this class of which the phenomenon of gender is a member? This question then took me to Fanon, to his redefinition of the human, as being defined by phylogeny, ontogeny, sociogeny. And therefore, as biological beings who can only experience ourselves as human, through the mediation of culture-specific masks.

So then I asked myself, What if that something else, of which the phenomenon of gender is a member, was that of Fanon's masks? That is, of the governing sociogenic principle that is a characteristic of our varying verbally defined modes of being human, and in whose terms we experience ourselves as humans, as for example, the governing genomic principle of a bat is specific to its experiencing of itself as such a mode of purely organic being? It's experiencing, as Thomas Nagel says, of what *it's like* to be a bat!<sup>79</sup> So this was the insight that I would try to put forward in a paper that I gave in 1998 in honour of the black American writer Sherley Anne Williams. The title of the paper was "Gender or the Genre of the Human? History, the 'Hard Task' of *Dessa Rose*, and the Issue for the New Millennium".<sup>80</sup> And what I argued in it was that what *is* central, what *is*, in effect, the *class* of classes, is the code of symbolic life/death that institutes our genres of being human. This means that while the gender opposition had served to enact the raw/cooked, biological/symbolic code by enabling it to be anchored and mapped onto the anatomical differences of the sexes, and therefore had been the archetypal *form* of all such codes, it is *not* the code itself. For if we look at the rise of Christian monotheism, we see that by the time of the Middle Ages the governing master code of symbolic life/death was now actualized in the theologically formulated difference between clergy and laity, between the "cooked" life of the Redeemed Spirit and the "raw" life of the Fallen Flesh. While at the same

79 See Thomas Nagel, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?", *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

80 Sherley Anne Williams is professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of the historical novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986). Wynter's paper was written for the panel "Meditations on History, *Dessa Rose* and Slavery Revisited", as part of the symposium held in honour of Sherley Anne Williams, entitled Black Women Writers and the High Art of Afro-American Letters, hosted by the Department of Literature, University of California San Diego, 15–17 May 1998.

time, the gender roles of the medieval order were themselves structured now in spirit/flesh terms. Women, like Eve and like the peasantry at the bottom of the social ladder, were therefore being represented by the learned scholars of the time as being more prone to the temptations of original sin, more prone to give into carnal desire, to the wicked lusts of the flesh!

DS: Quite apart from the details of your theoretical conception of human orders, what is striking about this conception is the several registers in which you want the theory to operate simultaneously. Your theoretical projects have to recognize, for example, a *cognitive* register, a *biological* register, a *physiological* register. It has to operate at many different registers simultaneously. At a time when many would argue for a much more *partial* theoretical perspective, your theoretical project moves in the opposite direction, to a more *comprehensive* conception. Why is that?

SW: Well, it's like this. Gayatri Spivak made the point in her essay ["Can the Subaltern Speak?"] that Foucault and other European theorists know nothing about the broader narratives of imperialism, of the *experience* of imperialism.<sup>81</sup> Yet this is the very point that Foucault made himself when he called for an alliance politics. Each group, he suggested, is limited to the experience of its local, its specific situation. It is this local situation that then provides both the specific terrain and the specific "motive for combat", which determines the form of struggle of each such group. Why my theoretical projects have all these different registers comes directly from the terrain, the kind of situation in which I found and still find myself, and which impels my motive for combat. So this takes us back to the institution of the slave plantation system, the *encomienda* system. Now, from the very beginning of the modern world, the people from whom I will descend, the *negros/negras* who are interned in the slave plantation, would have found themselves experiencing the destructive underside of that "broader narrative". While we who are their descendants would have clearly continued to experience the negative legacy of the powerlessness, the everyday impoverishment that this broader narrative would have prescribed for us. Now, during the second wave of imperialism, a Spivak would also have come to experience something of the same. So I am sure that her parents, if not she herself, would have experienced what I experienced. Now, I knew what it was like to have written stories about historical events that had taken place in England, even though I had never been

81 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

there. For the fact was that I knew nothing about my own historical reality, except in the negative terms, that would have made it normal for me, as Fanon points out, both to *want* to be a British subject and, in so wanting, to be anti-black, anti-everything I existentially was. I knew what it was to experience a total abjection of being. A Foucault would never have experienced that, in those terms. Yet this was his very point. That the terrain on which we “natives” find ourselves calls for an appropriate and specific motive for combat. It is therefore this situation, this terrain in which I find myself, that calls for what you identify as a “more comprehensive conception”. Terry Eagleton makes a similar point somewhere. He points out, in every human order there are always going to be some groups for whom knowledge of the totality is necessary, seeing that it is only with knowledge of the totality that their dispossession can be brought to an end.<sup>82</sup>

DS: But you don't only want knowledge of a historical totality, or knowledge of a cultural totality, or knowledge of a social totality, or knowledge of a political totality. You want a knowledge that breaks across not only the conceptions that the humanities and the social sciences provide, that the psychological sciences provide. So you want a different kind of totality than I think Eagleton is calling for.

SW: You are right. It is a different kind of totality. For Eagleton begins from the issue of class, and for him the totality is that of the mode of production. While that, for us, can only be a *part* of our totality, as is the case also with feminism's *patriarchy*.

DS: But I want to press you a bit. In your recent article on Frantz Fanon and his conception of sociogenesis, part of what you want to elucidate is the problem of the experience of being black.<sup>83</sup> But the elucidation of that experience for you has to pass through the problem of the origins of consciousness, and not simply the phenomenological origins of the experience of consciousness, say the phenomenological experience of the consciousness of blackness, but the *neural* experience. My question is why? Why does that register of the brain and of the origins of consciousness as a neural process emerge at all?

82 The reference is to Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

83 Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and what it is like to be 'Black' ", in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Change: Latin America between Marginalization and Integration*, ed. Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York, Garland Press, 2000, forthcoming).

SW: We have to return here again to the question of our specific terrain. Because it is as “native” colonial subjects, as black subjects, in a normatively Western and white world, that we experience ourselves in the terms of the specific order of consciousness that makes it possible for us to be, at times, aversive to ourselves. Now, were that consciousness genetically determined, as is that of any purely organic species, it could not *not* have been a purely narcissistic, self-validating one. So here we come to Fanon’s neo-Copernican leap, which he makes on the basis of his own “doubled” consciousness. In the case of humans, he says, besides the genetically programmed processes of ontogenesis, there is the, so to speak, symbolically encoded, processes of sociogenesis. So what is this going to mean with respect to consciousness, in the case of the human? It means that besides the neural firings which physiologically implement our reflex responses of aversion or attraction, there must be something else which determines *the terms in which* those neural firings will be activated and, therefore, the phenomenological experience. To put it another way, there is going to have to be a symbolically coded mode of the subject, of being human, for whose well-being these specific responses/firings will be of adaptive advantage. This then further means that what *causes* these specific neural firings to be activated in a specific modality is *not* a property of the brain itself (of ontogeny). Instead, it is a property of the verbal codes in whose positive/negative (good/evil, symbolic life/death) systems of meaning we institute ourselves as specific genres of being human. So we note here that the mind is not the brain. Since the causal source of the nature of our response does not lie in the neurophysiological mechanisms of the brain, which implement that response. It lies instead in the master code of the sociogenic principle. Since it is its meaning systems that determine *how* the mechanisms of the brain will implement our experience of being human, in the terms of each culture’s specific conception. This therefore means that our aversive responses to ourselves, our reality, are *socialized* rather than *natural* responses. But what caused that mutation, we could ask here? Why was it necessary? Why could we not have continued to have our behaviours, necessitated entirely by our genetic programmes, as in the case of all other species? Why did *our* social behaviours have to be necessitated both by our genes and by our culture-specific codes? I am going to propose that the emergence of language should be seen in a somewhat different manner from which we now see it. That we see it instead as part of an entire ensemble of mutations by means of which we were bioevolutionarily pre-prepared both to artificially reprogramme our behaviours, by means of narratively encoded behaviour-motivating programmes, based on the model of Girardot’s “significant ill”/“plan of salvation” schemas, and, at the same time, to



artificially individuate/speciate the modes of the I and the *we*, for whom the behaviours motivated by the narrative schemas will be of adaptive advantage. This would therefore mean that the always already socialized, and therefore symbolically coded, orders of consciousness through which we experience ourselves as this or that mode of the human have to be seen as the expression of a mutation in the processes of evolution, one by means of which a new level of existence, *discontinuous with evolution*, is brought into existence or, rather, brings itself into existence. Therefore, you see, as a level whose self-instituting modes of being will respond to and know its order of reality, *not* in the species-specific terms of its genome, of its genomic principle, but in the genre-specific terms of its narratively prescribed master code or sociogenic principle.

## THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF HUMANISM

DS: Your work on Columbus is crucial to your thinking about history and humanism, yes?

SW: Yes. As you know the history taught in British and US universities, and indeed at UWI is Anglo-centred. Because I had specialized in the Renaissance and Golden Age literature of Spain, in the courses that I taught on the Caribbean at US universities I had always explored the origins of the Caribbean, together with that of the modern world, in the context of the fifteenth-century Portuguese voyages around the bulge of Africa, their landing in Senegal, West Africa, then onto the Congo, then sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, to the East, with these followed by Columbus's 1492 voyage across the Atlantic. Now, in the early eighties, plans for the coming quincentennial commemoration of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean were being bruited about. Edward Seaga, who was prime minister in the then JLP government in Jamaica, saw this as an opportunity to develop his plans for a "heritage tourism" approach to what had until then been only a "sea and sand" form of tourism. The plan was to restore a complex of historical sites across the island. One of the central goals was to carry out the excavation and the restoration of the city, New Seville, on the north coast of Jamaica. This city had not only been the first city built by the Spaniards in Jamaica, beginning in 1509, it is also near the site on which Columbus had been shipwrecked for almost a year.

To help with this, Spain had sent a team of archaeologists to work on the excavation of New Seville. For after the 1655 conquest of the island by the English, the city had ended up buried under the cane fields of a sugar estate. However, once

the archeologists had succeeded in getting the work of excavation and restoration well under way a problem arose. This was that we had very little knowledge in Jamaica of the reality of New Seville and of its history. The English-centred nature of the history taught in schools and in the university had tended to erase the reality of the existence of pre-1655 Spanish Jamaica. So I was asked to go to the Archives of Indies in Seville, Spain, see what documents I could find, then afterwards spend a year working on the project and writing up some of the historical facts about New Seville for general information.<sup>84</sup>

So I went. First to Seville, Spain, then I spent the academic year 1983–84 in Jamaica. The documents I had found in Seville, as well as the excavations at New Seville, enabled me to go back into that quite other world of Spanish-Arawak-African Jamaica, to immerse myself in it. Now, not long after I got there, the *Daily Gleaner* led with a powerful editorial which attacked the very idea of Jamaica's taking part in the commemoration of Columbus's voyage, since it had led to so much suffering and disaster for the peoples of the New World as well as of Africa! So I was faced with a problem. What do you do with an event like that? On the one hand, the large-scale brutalization, in the end, the total extinction of the Arawaks; from 1518 onwards, the middle passage trauma of the enslaved Africans, the epidemic of death, the horrors of their slave plantation existence when they reached the shore. Yet on the other, this is also the event that is going to make our own existence possible; it is going to bring the modern world into being, is going to change reality for all of us, insert us into the single history we now live. So how do you approach it?

When my year was up, I came back to teaching at Stanford and decided that I would work on developing an *entirely* new interpretation of 1492. That I would try to develop an approach that could move outside either the purely celebratory terms of a Western perspective or the purely reactive terms of an anti-Western one. What if we were to try to look at it, I thought to myself, to see what it had meant not just within the terms of Western history but at the level of human history as a whole? So I devised

84 These would include the two booklets, *New Seville: Major Dates, 1509–1536, with an Aftermath, 1536–1655* (Kingston: Jamaica National Trust Commission, 1984), and *New Seville: Major Facts, Major Questions* (Kingston: Jamaica National Trust Commission, 1984), as well as the article "New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de las Casas", parts 1 and 2, *Jamaica Journal* 17, no. 2 (May 1984): 25–32; 17, no. 3 (August 1984): 46–55. It is important to remember, however, that Wynner had already written significantly on the Spanish period. See her astonishing essay "Bernardo de Balbuena: Epic Poet and Abbot of Jamaica, 1562–1627", parts 1–4, *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 3 (September 1969): 3–12; 3, no. 4 (December 1969): 17–26; 4, no. 1 (March 1970): 11–19; 4, no. 3 (September 1970): 6–15.

a new course entitled "Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: 1492, a New World View", which I taught at Stanford in the years leading up to 1992. While I was teaching this course I got hold of a brilliant article written by Pauline Moffit Watts, in which she had documented the millenarian underpinnings of Columbus's thought.<sup>85</sup> It was his millenarian beliefs, she showed, that had impelled his thought to go beyond the limits of the orthodox Christian geography of the time. Because, for him, Christ was due to return in some 150 years, the duty of a Christian was not only to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims but also to spread out all over the world, in order to convert all pagans, and gather up all the earth's peoples into one sheepfold, one flock. So like his mixture of other motives, his ambition for improved social status, his obsession with the acquisition of wealth, his lust for gold, there was, as centrally, his millenarian motive. Then, when I studied his letters – he had also written a very long letter from Jamaica – I realized how right she was. What I saw there was the way in which his fervent millenarian Christian belief served as a kind of Christian humanism, that pushed him to challenge the presuppositions of orthodox geography of the then theologically absolute order of knowledge. Now, I am sure you know of the crass mistakes with respect to distance that Columbus made, as well as of the nature of his belief that when he was in the Caribbean that he was actually on the outskirts of Asia! But what had been centrally at issue here was *the specific presupposition* of the orthodox geography, one that would have made his voyage impossible. So this is where his fervent millenarian beliefs kicked in. In the orthodox geography of the time, the earth was presupposed to be divided into two non-homogenous areas, those inside God's grace which were habitable [and] those outside it which had to be uninhabitable. So as a result, not only was there the presupposition, at least before the voyages of the Portuguese disproved it, that the Torrid Zone, and therefore Africa, south of the Sahara, had to be *inhabitable*. There had also been another presupposition linked to the first. This was that the land of the Western Hemisphere *had to be*, within the logic of the Christian-Aristotelian physics of the time, under water, in its natural place, rather than being held up above the element of water, by God's providential grace. Therefore, non-existent! So as you're reading Columbus's letters, and as you see where he is insisting that although he is only a layman, and a lowly born, self-taught one, the Holy Spirit has filled him with the knowledge to know that "God *could* have put land

<sup>85</sup> The reference is to Pauline Moffit Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus, *Enterprise of the Indies*", *American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (1985): 72–102.

over there”, you realize that what he is challenging here, and what he would also challenge with his voyage, was the orthodox ethnoreligious geography of his time. That is to say, a geography for which a principle of non-homogeneity *had* to exist between those habitable areas inside God’s grace, and those outside it. So that if we see here that in the wake of the Portuguese and Columbus’s voyages, then of the spate of voyages which followed after, human knowledge of the earth’s geography would gradually come to be freed from having to verify the *habitable/uninhabitable* presupposition that, in the case of Europe, had been the structuring of the medieval aristocratic social order, a recognition begins here. Then, when we also come to realize that it was a parallel presupposition that Copernicus would have to call in question as the condition of his new astronomy – that is, the presupposition central to the Christian-Ptolemaic astronomy of the time that there was a non-homogeneity of substance between the incorruptible heavens on the one hand and the degraded corruptible earth, fixed and motionless at the centre of the universe as its dregs on the other – and one that was no less indispensable to the structuring of the medieval order, the recognition becomes even clearer. This is that, at one level, that of our species knowledge of the physical reality of which we are a part, an emancipatory process of cognition, one that will lead to the development of the physical sciences, is here being set afoot.

But then he gets there. Having sailed the hitherto held to be non-navigable Ocean Sea/Atlantic Ocean! And what happens once he gets there? All the horrors that will lead to the eventual extinction of the indigenous peoples of Jamaica, the Arawak Indians, that will set in motion the centuries-long agonies of Africans caught up and forcibly transported in chains across the long wet hell of an Ocean Sea now known at last by Europeans to *be* navigable. But note the contradiction here: all this at the same time as the processes that govern, that motivate and demotivate our human behaviours still remained as unknown to them then, as they still remain opaque to us now, as Godelier suggests. So how do you come to grips with that?

Then while I was struggling with this question, Vera Hyatt of the Smithsonian Institution got in touch with me about a conference that she planned to put on for the quincentenary commemoration. I worked with her and several others, including Rex Nettleford, on the planning of the conference. In the keynote address which I gave, I argued that while it was the 1492 event that would set in motion the bringing together of the hitherto separated branches of our human species within the framework of the single history that we all now live, and while it had led to incredible techno-scientific and other such dazzling achievements, as well as to the material

well-being of one restricted portion of humanity, it had also led to the systemic large-scale degradation and devalorization, even the extinction, of a large majority of the peoples of the earth. Further, that this Janus-faced contradiction was itself due to the partial and incomplete nature of the emancipatory breakthroughs in cognition that the voyage of 1492, the voyages of the Portuguese before and the challenge of Copernican astronomy after, as well as the intellectual revolution of Renaissance humanism which was their seedbed, had set in motion. And, therefore, that the only way in which the large-scale sufferings inflicted on those groups who had found themselves on the losing side of those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century encounters, as well as of the continued imperial expansion of the West after, would be for us to complete the partial emancipatory breakthrough at the level of human cognition that the voyages themselves had made possible. In the light of this, as I saw it, the event of 1492 should be commemorated five hundred years after only to the extent that it marks – *from* an ecumenically human perspective and *to* an ecumenically human interest – the beginning of new possibilities. And one such possibility would have to be, and imperatively so, that of our being able to effect the deconstruction of the mechanisms by means of which we continue to make opaque to ourselves, attributing the origin of our societies to imaginary beings, whether the ancestors, the gods, God or evolution, and natural selection, the reality of our own agency with respect to the programming and reprogramming of our desires, our behaviours, our minds, ourselves, the I and the we.

DS: What you want, in part, is to *complete* the “incomplete victory” of 1492.

SW: Yes, exactly.

DS: I think that was one of the ways that you put it in that article.<sup>86</sup> And what you see in Columbus is an incomplete secular humanism.

SW: Not quite. He was a millenarianist Christian. But this millenarianism was an underground form of the current of Christian humanism. Now, the central challenge of the lay or secularist humanists was to the then orthodox theocentric conception of the Christian God. This conception was that this was a totally omnipotent God who had created mankind only as an afterthought, without any special concern for its sake. So Columbus’s fervent millenarist belief in God as a caring father who had created the

86 Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View”, in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

earth “for the salvation of souls”, and which therefore meant that all regions were habitable and all seas were navigable, had something of the same thrust as that of the secular humanists. Since *their* central thrust was to revalue natural Man by counterarguing that rather than being hopelessly fallen, as he had to be in the theocentric conception, he was the being for whose sake a loving God had created the world. This world could therefore be knowable by Man. So they belonged to the same current, but Columbus’s stance was millenarianist.

DS: But he is attempting to break out of the theocentric absolutism of an earlier order?

SW: Yes. Out of the social structures of a still hegemonic medieval-aristocratic order, in which as a lowly born mapmaker-cum-merchant and a self-taught layman he could have had no place, and social structures that the theologically absolute order of knowledge legitimated. It is for people who belonged to this stratum, and who had tied their fortunes to the emergent order of the state, that humanism and its invention of Man rather than noble (man) would have been emancipatory.

DS: Right. But what you recognize – as, of course, Césaire and Fanon recognize – is that there is an inner lining of humanism, in which the degradation of man is part and parcel of the elevation of man.

SW: We can see the reality of this for the indigenous peoples once Columbus arrives in the Caribbean. We can see it today in the degradation of the jobless, of the incarcerated, the homeless, the archipelago of the *underdeveloped*, the expendable throwaways.

DS: But my question is this, that recognizing the false humanity of the humanism of Europe leads many people to abandon the hope for a new humanism. You have not abandoned that hope.

SW: Not at all.

DS: You want – if I might put it this way – to *re-enchante* the human in humanism. What justifies this? Why not abandon humanism? Why not leave humanism to Europe?

SW: Because we have to recognize the dimensions of the breakthroughs that these first humanisms made possible at the level of human cognition, and therefore of the possibility of our eventual emancipation, of our eventual full autonomy, as humans. Let me tell you of a point that Nicholas Humphrey recently made in his book on the history of the mind, since it can perhaps best explain why we simply can’t discard these first humanisms, or just leave them to Europe.<sup>87</sup> Reality, Humphrey reminds us,

comprises two sets of facts: one of these is objective, the other is subjective. Now, the first set of facts existed from the very origin of the universe, but the second came into existence only with the emergence of sentient life, which took place a billion or so years ago. This was so, because for any physical event to exist *as* a subjective feeling, it could only do so for some entity for which that event “mattered”. For which, in effect, that was what it meant. So truth came into the world at the same time also. But it could only do so as *truth-for*. Since every sentient form of life, every living species, would now be able to know its reality only in terms of its specific *truth-for*; that is, in terms that were/are of adaptive advantage to its realization, survival and reproduction as such a form of life – to know its reality only *adaptively*. Now, this is *no less the case* with our culture-specific genres of being human. So the breakthroughs I am referring to are *breakouts*, if only still partial and incomplete ones, from that adaptive *truth-for* imperative. For example, before the voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus we can say that all geographies, whatever their great success in serving human needs, had been ethnogeographies – geographical *truth-for* a genre of the human. Before Copernicus, the same. And all astronomies by means of which humans had regulated and legitimated their societies had been, in the last instance, ethnoastronomies. Before Darwin, again the same thing. Knowledge of biological forms of life had been, in spite of their great value for human needs, ethnobiologies. And now the rupture with these forms of truths-for is going to be made possible only by means of the two intellectual revolutions of humanism, the first which took place in Renaissance Europe, the second which took place at the end of the eighteenth century in Great Britain. But those breakthroughs were able to go only so far. They were/are unable to go further. You see, the paradox here is that they themselves are only partial humanisms, only, so to speak, ethnohumanisms. Or to put it more precisely, in our case, an ethno-class or Western-bourgeois form of humanism, whose *truth-for* at the level of social reality, while a truth-for Man, cannot be one for the human.

DS: There is, Sylvia, a demand for, a hope for, a search for, a new universalism?

SW: Yes. One whose truth-for will coincide with the empirical reality in which we now find ourselves, the single integrated history we now live. You see, the problems that we confront – that of the scandalous inequalities between the rich and the poor countries, of global warming and the disastrous effects of climate change, of large-scale

87 The reference is to Nicholas Humphrey, *A History of Mind: Evolution and the Birth of Consciousness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

epidemics such as AIDS – can be solved only if we can, for the first time, *experience* ourselves, not only as we do now, as this or that *genre* of the human, but also *as* human. A new mode of experiencing ourselves in which every mode of being human, every form of life that has ever been ever enacted, is a part of us. We, a part of them.

DS: In order to make this kind of argument, do you not need a kind of ontologically prior human/nature ground on which these codes, these historical codes, are inscribed? A ground that forms the basis for the emancipated ecumenical conception of the human that you want to voice?

SW: That's very well put. However, I was so caught up in listening to the way you formulated it, that I am not sure how to answer it.

DS: Let me put it another way. There is in your thought, on the one hand, a radical rehistoricization, because it is a transgressive countermove to the conventions of historiography, in particular historiographies of the relationship between Europe and its others. So there is on the one hand a radical rehistoricization that attempts to illuminate the place of Man in Europe's autobiography. But, on the other hand, you don't simply want to historicize humanism, you want to provide the ground for a different imagining of *the* human. But that reimagining of the human has in some way to rest on an unhistoricizable a priori, and it is that unhistoricizable a priori that I want to understand.

SW: Well, that was also the issue at the heart of the quarrel between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss.<sup>88</sup> For Sartre, history is the ground of everything, and so it is also, you will recall, for Jameson.<sup>89</sup> But for Lévi-Strauss all history, including our present Western one, is always already coded, already *history-for*, always already an ethnohistory. Now, here is where the conception of the genre of the human and of the governing sociogenic principle comes in. For it would be the code, the law of the code, the principle, which functions as the ground of the history that will be narrated and existentially lived. So the ground of our mode of being human will itself be the a priori or ground of the history to which it gives rise. But the paradox here, of course, is that it cannot itself be historicized within the terms of the ethnohistory to which it will give rise: that code/mode must remain, as you say, unhistoricizable. As ours now

88 The reference is to chapter 9, "History and Dialectic", in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 245–69. This was a response to Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which first appeared in French in 1960.

89 See, famously, Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, that begins with "Always historicize!" (p. 9).



remains for us. So I want us to see history at two levels: I mean there is this history of us as a human species, wherever we are, in whatever part of the world, whatever the terms, the way in which we're enacting, instituting ourselves as human and, if you look at it from our contemporary view, peopling the entire planet. So we are starting from a very small scale in Africa, where the singularity of our hybrid bios-logos, nature-culture mode of self-inscribing human beingness, in always-sacred religious terms, first occurs some fifty thousand years ago. Then spreading out across and from that continent, eventually to make ourselves at home in every nook and cranny of the earth. So there's that history. But then, inserted into that history, as a part of it, is another history. And it is in this history, in which the idea of humanism, of its de-godding of our modes of self-inscription first erupts, where Man and its human Others – that is, Indians, Negroes, Natives – are first invented. And this history is the history of the expansion of the West from the fifteenth century onwards, and an expansion that is carried out within the terms of its own cultural conception of its own origins. And you see, it is this ethnoculturally coded narrated history that is taught both in a now global academia as well as in all our schools, while it is this history in whose now purely secular terms we are all led to imagine ourselves as Man, as purely biological and economic beings. The *history* for Man, therefore, narrated and existentially lived as if it were the *history-for* the human itself.

So what I am saying here is that up until now, there has been no history of the human. Our only "universal" histories are ones conceived in monotheistic religious terms. So Judaism has its own "universal" history and so has Islam. While we now live as Man in the second millennium only because we're living in a Judaic/Christian conception of history, one that is now secularized.<sup>90</sup> Man's history-for is therefore now put forward as if it were transcreeedal, supracultural, universal. And my point here is that if we are to be able to reimagine the human in the terms of a new history whose narrative will enable us to co-identify ourselves each with the other, whatever our local ethnos/ethnoi, we would have to begin by taking our present history, as narrated by historians, as empirical data for the study of a specific cultural coding of a history whose narration has, together with other such disciplinary narrations, given rise to the existential reality of our present Western world system – that is, to the reality of a system enacted about the ethno-class conception of the human Man, which represents itself as if it were the human, and in which we all now live.

90 This interview took place, remember, in November 1999.

DS: One of the things you take from Foucault is history understood as the organization and reorganization of *epistemes*. For Foucault, an *episteme* does not constitute a line of progression from one to another. The emergence of a new *episteme* constitutes a break and a mutation for Foucault, but not a *breakthrough*. In your formulation, a new *episteme* constitutes a breakthrough, a kind of *advance* on what existed before, an *achievement*.

SW: Well put. But while there is a difference between us, the difference is not a contradiction. Where Foucault brings up the idea that each *episteme* institutes a new and discontinuous “politics” or regime of truth and leaves it at that, from my different terrain, I see each such politics of truth as both the effect and the proximate function of a more fundamental politics, one that institutes a regime of *being*. So, for me, that *episteme* is always the expression of the way in which we know ourselves adaptively in the terms that we inscript ourselves and are reciprocally inscripted to be. The *episteme*, therefore, functions to enact a specific genre of being human, to elaborate its governing code or sociogenic principle. So when Marx said that the ruling ideas of any society are the ideas of the ruling group, this is because a ruling group can only be a ruling group as long as it continues to actualize and embody in itself the name of what is *good*, that is, the code of symbolic life or criterion of being human about whose structuring good/evil principle the specific social order then self-organizes itself. As long as that ruling group continues to embody what Adam Smith calls, I think in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, “the economy of greatness”. So what I am saying is that the “politics of truth” of each *episteme* has to function in a way that enables its social reality to be known in terms that are of adaptive advantage to the survival, well-being and stable reproduction of the mode of being human that each ruling group embodies and actualizes.

DS: One of the threads that, as I see it, joins “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture” to “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism” to the recent article on Frantz Fanon is the preoccupation with humanism. As I said earlier in the interview, there is for you something admirable that Roger Mais is doing with the embattled humanism of *Brother Man* and *The Hills were Joyful Together*, and there is something admirable about the embattled humanism of Elsa Goveia. In both of them you might see the incomplete victory – to use your terms – of the secular humanist break of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is a way in which that recognition of the limits placed on Mais and Goveia perhaps

prompts an attempt to think theoretically about the problem of *humanism as such*. How do you respond?

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SW: It is my own experiencing of these same limits, I think, that would also lead me to grapple with the problem of humanism as such. So let me give you a kind of summing up or *summa* of the position to where I have come in trying to resolve that problem. Looking back, there are certain imperatives, as you say, that persist in my work. And this is because I was always in search of an answer to the same questions with which Mais and Goveia were wrestling. For example, why the severely impoverished lives of the majority of the darker peoples of the world, in a world of such vast productive capacity, of such abundance? Why, as Goveia asked, did the fact of blackness *have* to be a fact of inferiority, the fact of whiteness, vice versa? What linked these two questions to each other? Now, once I realized, after trying for many years, to find an answer to these questions in the terms of the Marxian explanatory model, I saw that I would have to find an alternative one. Yet what I knew from the beginning was that I would still need some concept that could carry over Marx's formidable insights, like his ideas of *activity*, of *productivity*, of something that one is *instituting*. What was this something, I asked myself, that needed as its own condition of existence the systemic impoverishment of the darker peoples of the world? The no less systemic inferiorization of the black and of other non-white peoples of the earth? To see something of what I mean, let us look at some recent events. At what happened to Rodney King, at the dragging death of the black man in Texas, the ritual humiliation of Abner Louilma, the forty-one-bullet police killing of Amadou Diallo.<sup>91</sup> This is just a sample. Now, if we put these incidents together, one question arises: Why the necessity for this insistent and obsessive degradation of a specific category of humans? Now, we must note at once that such a question cannot be answered in liberal humanist terms, since the answer there would be that it is just the way it is, it is just "human nature", just in the nature of things. But what if, following up on Marx, we were to propose that this insistent degradation, this systemic inferiorization, is an

91 In November 1991 Rodney King was beaten by four Los Angeles police officers, a beating caught on video. The following year, the criminal courts found the officers not guilty, a verdict that triggered rioting in Los Angeles. In August 1997 Abner Louilma was beaten and tortured by New York City police officers in Brooklyn's 70<sup>th</sup> Precinct, one officer ramming a broken piece of a brass into his rectum. In Texas, on 7 June 1998, James Byrd, Jr, a disabled man, was kidnapped, stripped and beaten by three ex-convicts, and dragged to his death behind a pick-up truck. Amadou Diallo was shot dead by New York City plain-clothes police officers who fired forty-one shots at him as he stood unarmed in the vestibule of his Bronx apartment building. In each of these cases the victim was black and the assailants white.

indispensable function of our collective ongoing production and reproduction of our present bioeconomic conception of the human, of its governing sociogenic principle? One in whose terms this specific category, like that of the poor, the jobless, the homeless, the underdeveloped, has been made to embody/actualize “the name of what is evil” to its ethno-class code of symbolic life or “name of what is good”? Even further, that this is so because it is we who must produce our modes of being human, our modes of the I and the we, doing so in order to artificially programme and reprogramme our social behaviours. And therefore, doing so, as lawlikely,<sup>92</sup> if hitherto as non-consciously, as a spider spins its web? That it is therefore within the imperative logic of our collective production and reproduction of our present ethno-class mode of being human, of what is, in effect, the social order of our present biocracy, that the answer to the *why* of the two questions that we posed earlier is to be found.

I think what opened up the possibility of such a hypothesis, for me, was the attempt I made to redefine the 1492 event outside of the either/or way in which it was being fought over. To say, no! We need instead to look at it both from an ecumenically human perspective *and* to the interest of the ecumenically human. Now, it was in trying to see the 1492 event within the framework of a provisional history of the human, one in which the history of western Europe was itself only *one* aspect, that I came to grasp the dimension of the break effected at the level of human existence by the voyages of the Portuguese, then by that of Columbus, followed by Copernicus’s new astronomy. And what I came to see was that, in both cases, the premise that both the voyages and Copernicus would have to call in question and disprove was the premise of the non-homogeneity of the physical universe. While it is the shattering of the premise of this non-homogeneity that would lead Isaac Newton to exult, as I cited him in a 1997 essay, that, seeing that there was no difference between heaven and earth, both were made of the same matter, then we should be able to extrapolate from the bodies nearest to us what the bodies furthest from us *must* be.<sup>93</sup> Now, what we have to note about these premises of non-homogeneity is not only that they are premises that had been indispensable to the instituting and legitimating of the structures of the medieval order, by enabling those structures to be experienced by its subjects as if they were supernaturally ordered and mandated ones. In addition, they had been premises central to the truth-for or adaptive ethno-knowledge through

92 For Wynter, processes that are “lawlikely” are rule-governed processes or non-arbitrary regularities.

93 Wynter, “Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables that Stir the Mind”.

whose paradigmatic lens the subjects of the order would have normally known Self, Other and World. But these premises were even more fundamental. For, as Stefan Chorover has brilliantly pointed out, in the context of Galileo's trial by the Inquisition for his support of Copernicus's theory that the earth moved about the sun, what should be noted here is that this premise of the earth's non-homogeneity of substance with that of the moving heavenly bodies, followed by the related premise of its non-moving status at the centre of the universe as its dregs, was one that had been indispensable to the production and reproduction of the "sinful by nature" conception of the human on which the church had come to base its hegemony. That is, both its own hegemony over the lay world, including the state, as well as the hegemony of its redemptive or behaviour-motivating plan of salvation over all other such plans.<sup>94</sup> This therefore means that the break made by the West from truth-for adaptive knowledge to scientific knowledge of the physical cosmos had been made possible, in the last instance, only by its reinvention of its social identity *outside* the limits of its earlier theocratic "sinful by nature" conception.

Then we come to Darwin and his big breakthrough. What do we find here? The same premise of non-homogeneity but now in different terms, yet ones that he is going to have to challenge, to shatter, as the condition of enabling the rise of the biological sciences. Here, too, we see Chorover's point repeated. This time the projected non-homogeneity is between divinely created-to-be-rational humans on the one side and the divinely created-to-be-irrational animals on the other. And this premise, too, had been as indispensable to the instituting of the definition of Man(1) as a rational political subject of the state, as the imagined non-homogeneity between the incorruptible substance of the heavens and the corruptible substance of the earth, had been to that of the church's "sinful by nature" conception. So it had been therefore as indispensable also to the instituting of the pre-bourgeois social order which had self-organized itself about its *rational/irrational* master code or sociogenic principle as the represented non-homogeneity between heaven/earth, spirit/flesh had been to the self-organizing structures of the medieval order.

So, again, what we note here is that it is only in the context of the intellectual revolution of liberal or economic (rather than civic) humanism that is being brought in from the end of the eighteenth century onwards by intellectuals of the bourgeoisie,

<sup>94</sup> The reference is to Stefan Chorover, *From Genesis to Genocide: The Meaning of Human Nature and the Power of Behavior Control* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979).

together with their redefinition of Man(1) in the purely secular and now biocentric terms of Man(2), that the rise of the biological sciences is going to be made possible. Since the new genre of being human, in its now purely de-godded conception is one that no longer *needs* to know the world of organic life in the ostensibly supernaturally ordered adaptive truth-for terms in which it had to be known by the subject-bearers of Man(1) – as it had been known, therefore, in the terms of Foucault’s classical *episteme*.

There is going to be a fundamental paradox here, however; that is, with Darwin’s shattering of the premise of non-homogeneity, and his desupernaturalizing of human origins. And this is that while humans, like all other forms of sentient life, had had its origin in interacting evolutionary processes, because the bourgeoisie is only going to be able to legitimate its hegemony as a ruling group by projecting evolution as both a natural-scientific fact on the one hand and as an ethno-class origin narrative on the other, a split would have to be put in place. So that while, from now on, all forms of organic life are going to be known increasingly non-adaptively by means of the emerging biological sciences, as far as knowledge of the human itself, as well as of its level of reality, was concerned, a Godelier-type mechanism of occultation was now going to have to be put into play. Seeing that any recognition of the fact that the human species had come to exist in a dual relation of both continuity and discontinuity with purely organic forms of life would have to be ruled out of court. Not only that! As well the fact that while there is indeed a relation of homogeneity between them at the primary biological level, the relation between humans/non-humans at a secondary level is one of non-homogeneity, that is at the level of the phenomenological (of how we *experience* what it is like to *be* human), that could not be allowed to surface. As could any suspicion of the fact that the very same environmentally interacting bio-evolutionary processes that had given rise to the human species, had pre-adapted it, by means of the co-evolution of language and the brain, to artificially programme and reprogramme its own social behaviours. Further, that to enable it to do so it had also pre-adapted this species to inscript/institute itself as specific modes of the *I* and of the *we*, with the members of the *we* then being made able to display kin-recognizing behaviours to each other, even where not genetically programmed to do so, as social insects like the bees are. Seeing that, it is now *for* this sociogenetic *I*, this artificially speciated eusocial *we*, that a specific ensemble of *culturally* motivated behaviours will be experiencable as adaptively advantageous behaviours. That the mode of *truth-for* or adaptive ethnoknowledge through which each such *I* and *we* will know Self, Other and World, will also be experiencable as . . . true! Now, this “truth” would, of course, necessarily include the imagined premise of

non-homogeneity specific to the master code that is enacting of each such *I* and its *we*, as a premise which, in every human order is mapped onto the “objective set of facts” of the physical and organic cosmos, thereby enabling that code and its value divide between symbolic life and symbolic death to be experienced by its subjects, as if it were an extra-humanly prescribed mode of being rather than, as it empirically is, one self-authored by the subjects of the order themselves/ourselves.

Now, before the rise of the bourgeoisie, and its redefinition of Man, *extra-humanly* had meant, for all human groups, *supernaturally*. But Darwin has now banished the supernatural. So as I said earlier, the only remaining and available objective set of facts on which the new master code of the bourgeoisie, with its projected imagined divide between the *selected by evolution* and the *dysselected by evolution* is now to be mapped, so as to represent it as being *extra-humanly* determined, is the biologically, climatically and environmentally determined set of human hereditary variations which we have come to classify, in adaptive ethno-class terms, as “races”. It will be on the physiognomic differences between them that the new colour line premise of homogeneity/non-homogeneity will now be mapped.

So here we come back to Elsa Goveia, where after telling us that one of the central thrusts of Caribbean creative writing as it erupted in the midst of the anticolonial struggle was its challenge to the premise that the fact of blackness is a fact of inferiority, as the fact of whiteness is a fact of superiority, she further makes it clear that our task as intellectuals, our, so to speak, specific and unique motive for combat, will be to utterly demolish that premise. The connection stares us in the face. What she is challenging us to shatter, theoretically, is a parallel premise of non-homogeneity! This time, an imagined non-homogeneity of genetic substance between two human hereditary variations, one classified in adaptive terms as “white”, the other as “black”. A premise in whose terms the *white* must be seen as being of a genetically superior substance, because selected and evolved, in exactly the same way as the heavenly realm, before Copernicus and Galileo, had had to be seen as incorruptible, with its bodies, because also made of an ontologically superior substance, always moving in perfectly circular harmonious movements. This as, at the same time, the “black” has to be seen as being of a genetically inferior a substance, because dysselected “backward” and barely evolved, as before Copernicus and Galileo, the earth had had to be seen as being of an ontologically inferior, because corruptible, substance.

So, if we were to ask now *why*, why is this premise of non-homogeneity, together with its colour line, as instituting of our contemporary order as the others had been of theirs, the answer would bring us back to Chorover's perceptive point, that the

imagined degraded non-moving status of the earth, had really had *nothing* to do with the earth itself. That the earth was simply an objective fact – the fact that people *felt* and *feel* the earth to be non-moving – that was being harnessed to *the* real goal, which was that of supernaturally validating the instituting of the “sinful by nature” inscription or genre of the human, and of its master code about which the medieval order of Latin-Christian Europe self-organized its roles, and its structuring hierarchies, at the same time, supernaturally legitimating them as it did so.

Now, once we apply Chorover’s insights, to our contemporary premise of non-homogeneity and go back from there to the two linked questions we posed earlier – that is, *Why* the obsessive degradation of a Rodney King, an Abner Louilma, of this specific category? *Why* the worldwide impoverishment of the darker peoples of the earth? – what we see is this: we see that, here too, their degradation and impoverishment is itself also *only* a means to, a function of, the real goal. And what is this goal? This goal, *our* goal, is that of continuing to validate the conception of our present genre of the human, Man, not in terms of its being *sinful by nature* or even of its being potentially irrational by nature but, rather, in the terms in which we have been socialized to experience ourselves to *be*. And that is, as a being who is *always already* dysselected by evolution, until it proves, by its success in the real world, and therefore, a posteriori, that he/she and/or his/her group or race has indeed been selected! It is here that we can recognize the enormous fallacy, the dangerous absurdity of our present form of ethno-class humanism. As if human beings could ever, *outside* the terms of our present biocentric/genre conception, be any *less* selected (dysgenic) or *more* selected (eugenic) than a woman can be more or less pregnant!

Nevertheless, they, we, can be, and indeed *are* now, stably produced and instituted *as if* indeed they/we were, whether at the level of the colour line, the class line, the sexual orientation line, the gender line, the West/Rest line, the developed/underdeveloped line, and so on. So why do we *so* institute ourselves? Because the nature of our dilemma as humans is that, within the terms of our present biocentric conception of the human (and, therefore, within the discourse of biological absolutism to which its necessarily adaptive and truth-for order of knowledge gives rise as the reciprocal condition of validating the mode of being human in which we now *are*), there is no way, none whatsoever, by which we can put a stop to the processes which we collectively put into play, as long as we continue to behave in the prescribed ways needed to realize ourselves as good men and women of our kind in the terms in which we have been socialized, inscripted to *be*. How then can we escape this closure, this circularity? What seemed to me to be the answer came in its



completed form in 1997 when I was taking part in a debate with feminists over the ritual practice of female circumcision, including its extreme form of clitoridectomy.<sup>95</sup> Now, feminist writers had seen this ritual practice from their/our normal, adaptive and biocentric perspective as “genital mutilation”. But what became clear to me was that what they were looking at, but not really seeing, *was/is* one of the earliest forms of human autopoiesis, of its self-inscripting. One of the first forms of writing in the larger sense, therefore, to which Derrida has so genially alerted us. Yet in spite of the illuminating nature of his thesis, we note that Derrida does not himself move, in any fundamental sense, outside the limits of the monocultural field of the West, outside the limits of what it now *calls* human. But if you move outside these limits, look at other cultures and their other conceptions, then look back at the West, at yourself, from a trans-genre-of-the-human perspective, something hits you. What you begin to recognize is that what the subjects of each order are everywhere producing is always a mode of being human, what Nietzsche [in *Genealogy of Morals*] saw as “the tremendous labour of man upon itself” by which it was to make itself calculable, its behaviours therefore predictable. This at the same time as we repress from ourselves that that is what we *are* doing: that we are, as humans, self-inscripting and inscripted flesh.

At this juncture, you find yourself caught up in an enormously revalorized sense of what it is to be human. A kind of awe at the way in which we auto-institute, auto-inscript ourselves according to the same rules, from the most “local” and ostensibly “primitive” nomadic hunter-gatherer societies to our own vast contemporary global techno-industrial own. Further, you experience a profound co-identification, 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.

There has always been one dilemma, however, from our origins until today. When situations change and the way we behave, oriented by the adaptive ways in which we lawlikely know Self, Other and World are no longer adaptive, as is now urgently so in our contemporary case, how can we come to know our reality outside the terms that had been adaptive to a reality that is now past and gone? How can we think *outside* the terms in which we *are*? Think *about* the processes by which we

95 Sylvia Wynter, “‘Genital Mutilation’ or ‘Symbolic Birth’?: Female Circumcision, Lost Origins and the Aiculturalism of Feminist/Western Thought”, *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 47, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 501–52.

institute ourselves as what we are, make these processes transparent to ourselves? This was the dilemma that the Caribbean Negritude poet Aimé Césaire addressed head-on when he called for a new science a half a century ago. Césaire argued, in a talk that he gave entitled “Poetry and Knowledge”, that the natural sciences are half-starved. They are half-starved, he said, because in spite of all their dazzling cognitive triumphs, when it comes to the non-human domain, they have been unable to provide us with any such breakthrough, any such insights, with respect to our uniquely human world. Only a new science of the Word, he said, one in which the “study of the word” would now condition the “study of nature”, will be able to provide the new knowledge now urgently needed by a beleaguered humankind.<sup>96</sup>

So this brings us back to the question about the “neural firings” that you posed earlier. Since one of the objects to be explored by such a science would be the rule-governed correlation between these neural firings and the positive/negative meanings of the sociogenic principle or master codes to which the Word gives rise, meanings which, by activating them, *determine* the modality of their firing and therefore of our responses. At the same time, this is only one aspect of the overall new object of knowledge that will constitute this new science’s nature-culture domain. This new object of knowledge is that of our genres of being human, of the governing sociogenic principles in whose symbolically coded and prescribed terms we inscript and thereby experience ourselves as an *I* and *we*. Lawlikely, yet hitherto non-consciously so. It is the making conscious of these processes for which a planetary – and in your terms, *re-enchanted* – humanism calls.

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96 The reference here is to Césaire’s paper “Poésis et Connaissance”, first read at a conference on philosophy held in Port-au-Prince in September 1944. It was subsequently published in *Tropiques* (January 1945), the literary magazine Césaire edited between 1941 and 1945. For details, see A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 13, 54, 289.