

Consciousness, the Self, and Sylvia Wynter's Notions of the Human

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Previously unacquainted with the writings of Sylvia Wynter, I come to realise that her thoughts provide an important source for research on notions of the human. A podcast I listen to, laughingly issues the warning of how difficult it is to unpack Wynter, so I start lightly by reading an interview in which Wynter addresses, amongst other things, the term 'people of colour'. The interview contains an enjoyable example of all caps.

"Do you realize what is happening? YOU HAVE 'PEOPLE,' WHO ARE THE 'REAL' HUMANS, AND THEN 'PEOPLE OF COLOR,' WHO ARE THE 'OTHERS.' [Laughter] BUT WE PLACIDLY AND HAPPILY ACCEPT THIS CONCEPTION. WE DON'T SAY, 'HOW WAS IT THAT ONE HUMAN HEREDITARY VARIANT CAUGHT UP IN THE ICE AND SNOW, AND SO ON AND SO FORTH, AND THEREFORE REPRESSING THE PRODUCTION OF MELANIN, IT BECOMES WHITE AND THEN TAKES OVER THE WORLD AND MAKES ITSELF INTO THE BIOLOGICAL NORM OF BEING!'"

(*Proud*, 13-14)

When the term 'People of Colour' was introduced in Berlin queer circles some decade ago (or longer than that, at a certain point everything past becomes 'ten years ago'), I was hoping for this to be a designator that would pass. But after some time, parties and workshops, it became noticeable that the self-designated name helped raise an awareness. There was a gradual change in the fabric of the atmosphere, a collective shift, as if some were making the effort to not be arrogant while others called for a more accurate version of history. I might have preferred other nuances when it came to terminology, but the 'we' that had emerged dealt me a stronger hand, at least I imagined it to be so; the insistent work of others having created an improved positionality for the racialised, Black, non-white, the diasporic subject, the person of colour. Race, the floating signifier has names for whiteness too. This change of atmosphere taught me the wisdom in swiftly formulating oneself as an interest group, to not stay the critical bystander. Details can be worked out as one goes along, the main thing is to not lose the momentum. Erratum: since perpetual movement is the credo of fascists, the fundamental thing is to stay on the democratic side of history.

In the Interview, Wynter also states: "the Black situation and the homosexual situation are parallel. We are the only ones who are socialized in such a way that we cannot trust our own 'consciousness'" (*Proud*, 3). The parallel Wynter envisions may mislead some readers to

imagine an either/or situation, one is either this or that, but this aside, the parallel suggests an understanding, solidarity even, between people deviating from the norm, which I like, though I realise that it is difficult to bond across causes. The effects that socialisation has on one's consciousness and that make the self unreliable, as Wynter argues, are elucidated through W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. Referring to the situation of African Americans in white dominated USA at the beginning of the twentieth century, Du Bois outlines double consciousness as the experience of always needing to measure oneself according to the norms of the dominant culture. Before the civil rights movements, and still today, the failure or refusal to assimilate to whiteness had serious consequences in terms of personal safety and opportunities to improve one's living standard. Historically, rulers, as well as the rule of the people, have benefited those with whom the formation of a 'we' has been possible: "the *us* for whose sake, and in whose name we act", as Wynter describes it (1492, 30). At times, the boundaries of this 'we' are constructed along national borders, against an external adversary, but groupings based on shared "symbolic representational systems" cause excluding effects within a society as well (Ibid.).

At best, those who live outside the norms of the dominant culture develop an oppositional consciousness (Sandoval), the perspective of someone experiencing their own situation as socially unjust and as circumstances that can be changed through collective action. Oppositional consciousness is manifested in theory and writings that refute the promise of normalcy, instead probing for new ways to conceptualize what it means to be human. Rather than striving to become 'equal', i.e. – adapting to white, male, heteronormative standards – activists/theorists point to alternative conceptualizations of personhood. As James Baldwin rhetorically asks in the autobiographical essay *Down at the Cross*: "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?" (340), i.e., a society structured by white supremacy and heteronormativity. Baldwin's essay is illustrative in that it describes how social factors bear upon the individual, and how life is less likely to be smooth sailing if one is not part of the dominant culture. Growing up in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, Baldwin considers his options in terms of building a life. He describes how the sole exit readily available was offered by the church, as this was the only social institution, other than prison, that interpellated young people from the neighbourhood. Eventually, Baldwin's talent for writing provided the escape route.

Wynter describes the existing world order as geared towards accommodating the 'ethnaclass of Man'. Man capitalized. Colonial history has shaped notions of what it means to be human

and a political subject, but from different directions, activists, writers, and theorists have challenged the ideal of the enlightened, universal, and autonomous individual. While Audre Lorde describes this ethnoclass as a “mythical norm” consisting of “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure” people (126), Wynter defines it loosely as the “Western bourgeois” (*Unsettling*, 260) and traces the developing dominance of Man throughout history. Since the fifteenth century, European colonizers have legitimised the oppression of other people by establishing a system of knowledge according to which they classified themselves as fully human, while others were labelled as subhuman or non-human. The conquistadors who conquered the Americas in the sixteenth century, brought up the issue whether the Indigenous Americans were ‘subhuman’ to justify the brutal suppression of entire populations. Western slave traders debated if Africans were subhuman to legitimize chattel slavery, and in Ancient Greece, often thought to be the cradle of Western Civilization, women and ‘barbarians’ were considered of lesser value than men/human. Over the centuries, one hegemonic genre of humanness has followed the other. Initially, Man bestowed himself the highest degree of humanness on the grounds that he was Christian but with increasing secularisation in the nineteenth century, another form of legitimisation was needed, and so rationality became the decisive difference. Man justified the enslaving and expropriating of others by defining himself as the most rational of all creatures.

It is documented that in the fifteenth century, the Cenú people of what is now Colombia responded in the following way to the Spaniards’ claim that the pope had the sovereignty to expropriate Cenú land and give it to the Spaniards: “About the Pope being the Lord of all the universe in the place of God, and that he had given the lands of the Indies to the King of Castille, the Pope must have been drunk when he did it, for he gave what was not his...” (*Unsettling*, 286). Sylvia Wynter has titled one of her essays *The Pope Must Have Been Drunk*. It is as if the image of the Cenú people questioning the absurdity of what would become the ‘natural’ order, streaks through the centuries; a recorded piece of history that seems a perfect example of what Walter Benjamin called ‘Eingedenken’. Long buried under dominant narratives, a moment in the past will insistently transport itself into the present, as a reminder that history is never concluded, that the past is but a series of conflicts of interest.

Though the proposal of the conquistadors is absurd, the worldview of the ethnoclass of Man has unfortunately prevailed (if you hadn’t noticed). Columbus and Co have dominated the global scene for centuries, making those who do not comply with the norms feel bad for not

being up to standard. The enslaved and colonized peoples, and their descendants, have lived with a double consciousness, the feeling of perceiving oneself through the eyes of others. But another way of looking at it, is that those outside the norm of Man have carried a greater awareness that not all people abide to the one worldview. In a letter to a friend, Alice Walker speaks of the importance of being able to straddle two or more minds:

““we are the African and the trader. We are the Indian and the Settler. We are oppressor and oppressed . . . we are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are ‘white, too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness: ‘white’ people have shown us the madness of that.”” (*U.S. Third*, 207)

Here, it seems that a fragmentation of mind is a prerequisite for maintaining a healthy psyche, Walker turning it into a richness, a skill set, to be able to see oneself as others do, to understand that the totality is in fact particular. On second thoughts, Walker might be stating that psychological distress stems from having too much insight while not receiving enough recognition from society.

To Wynter, the dissonance in our consciousness that is caused by racism, is one of the indications of why it makes little sense to define what it means to be human simply in biological terms. The division between nature and culture that is so fundamental to the knowledge system created by the ethnoclass of Man does not take the discrepant experiences of what it means to be human into account. Wynter argues that race is the foundation upon which secularizing Europe has constructed the answer to the question of ‘who’ and ‘what’ a human being is. Race is the main designator of difference. In Wynter's view, there can be no innocent articulations of what a human being is since formulations of humanity do not revolve around differences between, say, the natural and the supernatural but are based upon distinctions between human and sub-human. Social notions have created a language that ultimately assigns life and death different meanings depending on levels of humanness. As Michel Foucault noted, the principle of similarity and difference is prevalent in modern thought, continuously reproduced through categories of centre and periphery or colonisers and colonised.

Take the psychoanalytic idea that traumatic experiences in our childhood are stored in the subconscious. This model is applied on an individual level, the therapist aiding the patient in order to excavate what is buried in the soul. But free association seems off the mark if the

trauma manifests itself in plain sight, continuously and repeatedly as part and parcel of the social climate. Frantz Fanon noticed how classical psychoanalysis offered insufficient explanations for the mental health of his patients, since alienation caused by racism “is not an individual question”(4). He coined the term sociogeny to denote a new conception of the mind, one which takes the lived experience of racism into account. Experiences shape our consciousness to the extent that it makes little sense to define the brain and body only in terms of biology or according to the idea of a universal human.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the “new mestiza” dismantles the nature/culture divide by expressly articulating a new form of humanness, a belonging to “a cosmic race” which is equipped with a different set of chromosomes and genetics than that of beings who operate with categories of colonizer and colonized (77). Anzaldúa’s consciousness is shaped by the *Borderlands*, an in-between space, a form of collective consciousness that refutes the dichotomy. Anzaldúa’s writing seems a rendition of Wynter’s call for a new understanding of what a human is; her first-person narrator removed from the unified “subjectivity of universal man” (Smith, 433) that is found in conventional autobiography. Anzaldúa’s persona eludes being pigeonholed in a certain category of human.

Monique Wittig comments on the risks of being deemed as particular rather than general in relation to writing:

“Writing a text which has homosexuality among its themes is a gamble. It is taking the risk that at every turn the formal element which is the theme will overdetermine the meaning, monopolize the whole meaning, against the intention of the author who wants above all to create a literary work. Thus the text which adopts such a theme sees one of its parts taken for the whole, one of the constituent elements of the text taken for the whole text, and the book become a symbol, a manifesto. When this happens, the text ceases to operate at the literary level; it is subjected to disregard, in the sense of ceasing to be regarded in relation to equivalent texts. It becomes a committed text with a social theme and it attracts attention to a social problem. When this happens to a text, it is diverted from its primary aim, which is to change the textual reality within which it is inscribed.” (62-63)

According to Wittig, Proust managed to make “the minority point of view universal” (64) in *Remembrance of Things Past* by writing about high-society French life in a way that makes readers identify with the heterosexual characters while at the same time realising that the plot

is actually about homosexuality all along. Monumental literature not ‘because’ but ‘even though’.

Theory by nonwhite scholars is often treated as distinctive and limited rather than as episteme that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the human condition, as a source for radical thought. But as Wynter states, the goal is not to deconstruct gender but rather to deconstruct genre, for if the genre of the “human of ‘Man’” is left intact (*Proud*, 24), the dismantling of gender cannot follow. Double consciousness and sociogeny are concepts developed out of the specific situations Black scholars and activists have experienced, but these thoughts are also relevant on a broader scale. The post-racial society has not arrived, and it is a fine line to tread between appropriation and acknowledging one’s sources and historical contexts, but if not attempted, whiteness is perpetually the default.

Wynter describes the global decolonization struggles that started around the middle of the last century as signifying a shift of the same magnitude as Copernican heliocentrism or Columbus stating that sailing west would not result in a plunge into the abyss. Up until the 1950s, a belief that ‘race’ was the reason for why some people had property, wealth, and potential to be the protagonists of a novel while others did not, prevailed in most parts of the world. But with decolonization began the process of a change of minds, a revolutionary (in every sense of the word) emergence of new subjectivities. In the USA, the Black liberation movement took up the struggle for another social order, mobilising a string of people to challenge the dominant Man-centric system of knowledge. People outside of the norm of Man began contextualizing their experiences as the basis for a politics of social transformation, to increasingly move in a tale of counternarratives. Representations of life began to be understood as one of many forms of literary expressions, particular instances rather than a prescriptive ideal. Not to suggest that before this moment grand narratives were not being undermined, it is more to say, that on a collective scale there is again the realisation that the earth is not flat.

Tavia Nyong’o quoting José Muñoz quoting Ernst Bloch. ‘I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin.’ Consciousness is not enough, making a difference requires that we activate ourselves as political subjects, that we become through the development of a political will. The speech was more eloquent than I’m able to recapitulate but in essence it reminded me of Claudia Rankine’s remark that “This is the world we have and if we are going to divorce ourselves from people in the population then we have given up a certain power to engage in

change together” (*Visionary Series*). Social change requires that we move outside the boundaries of our own groupings. Nyong’o gives his talk lying on a divan in a gallery space, surrounded by an aura of academic prophecy and queer suave. It is surprising that a lecture can have this effect. Exhilarated in my chair, I turn to my friend and say, or shout, ‘I am.’ ‘We are,’ she emphasises, ‘That’s enough, now let’s get a drink.’

How does one get used to silence? Growing up, I listened to my mother going on about her childhood house. The speech on Baghdad. The finale would be that her family, my family, even had animals, a great garden with chickens. Embarrassed, I never understood why she would boast about something belonging to the past, a house I would never see. Look at the state we are in now. For my mother Sweden has become a steadfast sanctuary. She will never leave, having had more than her share of moving. Years later, after I myself had migrated to a promised land, I walk in the neighbourhood of Dahlem, on my way to university. Going down a street of grand old houses, I hear chickens clucking from one of the gardens. I imagine it pleasant, to hear clucking chickens from time to time.

For a year, we lived in an apartment building that had been built as part of Sweden’s Million Programme scheme. Though being new to this environment, I sensed that this was a doubtful way of living. On one of many vacant afternoons, I examined a key ring my mum had received as a freebie for opening a bank account, a metal plate in gold and blue on which was written in italics: ‘*Time is money*’. The message evoked a world of bankers and stock markets, of cash flow by the minute, as seen on TV. Being a child with seemingly eternal time on my hands, I was willing to join in on the capitalization, curious of how to go about it for time to turn into money. Where would one start? But the maxim remained a mystery, a metaphor I could not live by.

I think of my mother as a madam who is hard to please, but the apple might not fall far from the tree. On one of her visits to Berlin, I take her to the ‘Arab street’, intent on showing her something that will remind her of Baghdad, thinking that it will be nice for my mother to do people watching, to be in the bustle of grocery bags and loud talking. We have a tense coffee and cake during which my mother makes me promise to never take her to this street again. We are Kurds [FFS]. Why do I not have a sense for these things? It seems untenable, my fixation with colonial history without the slightest knowledge on the formations of Kurds. Not a single

Kurdish theorist in my bookcase, but assimilation happened in a belated and displaced manner, as assimilation does, and so I turned to the radical positions within reach, looking to make myself at home elsewhere. After a youth of reading the ethnoclass of Man, that is. Not that it was particularly bad, since for a long time I thought of myself as belonging to this ethnoclass. This is what adolescents do, thinking they are destined, that the world centres around them, before reality seeps in. Only very late did I discover that I was not in this category, that the heroine of the story was not me. But in one way or another, this revelation, the anagnorisis when we come to recognise the truth about our circumstances, is a moment experienced by many. Frantz Fanon's concept of sociogeny comes to mind.

Matter over mind. A chorus of newly orphaned adults lament the injustice of being penniless. My father died! Mine too! Bastard! Mine too! The lament is a mixture of grief and grievance, as happens when evasive fathers die. The sober one of the company, I silently hope that my relatives' claim for reparations will come through, though I have too many relatives. We stand in a circle on the street, hysterically laughing after two years of social distancing. I am concentrating on getting the circle to move toward the pavement, but it continues to be drawn to the street, one step forward, two steps back. One father stashed away money in letterbox companies, now accessible only to the second wife and children. But, says the disinherited in a tone of vengeance and disbelief, her brother is on the case. Another not-to-be-heir recently had to rush to the tax office to disclaim 1,7 million euros in debts. The thought of being that much in minus has created some sleepless nights. Had she money, she would make sure to provide for her biological sisters and to create a space like this, for us to flourish in. I am informed that the gallery we are partying outside is not actually newly renovated but newly built. Correction, the artist is not renting the place, he is the owner, in fact, he has commissioned the entire building. We look up at four floors of sleek concrete and minimally furnished balconies. Tall man, lofty building.

It gets louder as the evening goes by. I make the simple announcement that there is a propaganda machinery surrounding tax, just look at the internal Tory vote. Don't eat the rich, tax the rich. The public sector is a mechanism to soften the blow, to create a safety net for the times we fall in life, which can happen to anyone. An extensive public sector makes worry redundant; no need to be distressed for not having inherited or for not being a homeowner. Tax takes care of business for us. The comprehensive school, the public swimming pool, the city library, public transport, these are all areas in which different mindsets coincide to share a little

bit of common life experience, spaces in which ideally differences in social status are levelled out. Admittedly, it is naïve to envision the public sector as spaces in which different consciousnesses can meet on equal terms, but at least there is the democratic pretence that it should be so. We have to cling on to pretence. My friends are annoyed at this newfound visionary pose. I am recommended to drink another water. This is not the choir I should preach to.

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