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Who's Man is This?

Black Radical Ecology and the Anthropogenic Question

Nsambu Za Suekama

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*"The question of questions for mankind, the problem which underlies all others, and is more deeply interesting than any other is the ascertainment of **the place which Man occupies in nature** and of his relations to the universe of things."*

– Thomas Henry Huxley (*emphasis added*)

"... all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources (20 percent of the world's peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth's peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic

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*of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North... these are **all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man** vs. Human struggle.”*

– Sylvia Wynter (*emphasis added*)

The media continues to say that humankind is inherently destructive to the environment. I’ve seen the images of bushfires in Australia that have rolled out over the past few weeks. It breaks my heart to watch koalas suffering, but it angers my soul even more to see the world cry about nonhuman animals while ignoring indigenous peoples who have faced environmental racism since the dawn of the white world order. Especially since the media blames ecological damages on how ‘evil’ or ‘unsustainable’ our species is, ignoring the fact that indigenous Australians *been* fighting for climate solutions and sustainability through their struggle for decolonization and self determination.

Scientists are now working to figure out how to prove that an ‘anthropocene’ is real – that humans truly have changed the earth’s natural systems in a negative way (or at least in a way other species haven’t). Defining the ‘Anthropocene’ is controversial because it involves so many economic and politico-cultural factors that seem to remove the ‘objective’ character of science that the white world demands. But, just recently, I saw an ecologist share a few pictures depicting ape and hominid skulls and skeletons, and saying that the words of Thomas Henry Huxley (shared above) were the answer the scientific community would need to figure out the origin of the ‘human-caused’ environmental crisis of today.

To theorize humanity’s ‘place’ in nature, though, in the way such a reference Huxley does – which theorizes humanity’s relationship to other Things in a primarily *biological* sense – is wrong. It is inaccurate to explain environmental catastrophes without exposing what Sylvia Wynter calls the “overrepresentation of Man.” When ‘Man’ is continuously overrepresented as our species, in the way that many scientists continue to do, it hides the true cause

and material interests that, as Russell Maroon Shoatz writes, are “on a collision course with... the planet.”

To save ourselves and the planet, we must oppose all forms of (white) authority, in order to abolish the imposition of the ‘Man’s’ will or material interests upon us all. This is the nature of Black Power. Every contradiction, every rift imposed on our people and the planet to the kkkolonizer’s benefit – Black Power seeks to cancel out through revolutionary propositions like the ‘Anarkata’ turn. Through revolution, we fight to ensure that our species is united with the earthly source of our empowerment and no longer differentially and violently removed from it, exploitatively re-arranged in it, and hierarchically denied full access to it by those who seek to control all resources for their own gain. Through revolution we fight for total decolonization, fight to build our power, fight to seize the means of production, fight to snatch back our own communion with the planet, fight to meet our needs and prioritize the most vulnerable over those clambering their way to the top. Through revolution we fight for an existence where members of our species can effectively ride for each other and for other beings, and where we can rise to meet community and ecological challenges in an encompassing way without reliance on the ‘Man’ (and white/authoritarian systems) who abuse us and Mother Earth because of their greed. Black Radical Ecology is the real answer to the ‘anthropocene’ question because it works toward the liberation of all Things!

actual interest in studying the world and how it works to try and resolve the planetary crises we are faced with. Imperialism is the cause of modern ecogenic crises, but the white world will not admit this in their 'environmentalist' movements because profit is more important to them than actually protecting the planet.

It threatens white pursuits of Capital when we teach ourselves that 'Man's place' (as Huxley is curious to know) in the universe is not 'natural' in the flat, mystifying way that white science asserts. To believe beyond this mystification is to believe that our entire global condition of affairs can be altered. It is to believe that the planet's ruin can be prevented by revolution – whereas they want us to give up on our capacity to change things. They want us to fear total annihilation and cede our destinies to 'natural' forces of environmental destruction that are actually just sneaky developments by rich kkkolonizers. They say the next mass extinction will come by 2030 and that we only have 'twelve years' to stop complete chaos, but it's all a way to scare us into letting them consolidate a new iteration of the Man's quest to rule over the universe. But, again, we are not doomed to some sort of ecocidal 'original sin' ontology (philosophy of our inherent being). We, our planet, and our history together can be transformed and renewed by the Light of a consuming fire: for the ecological problem is not an apocalypse, but the need for Massa's house to burn...

The mantra we must speak to our spirits: the Anthropocene is not 'human' (ie, rooted in homo sapiens, our species' genetic code) but rather Man's hand. Anthropogenic environmental impact doesn't have to look one way. Because capitalist, colonial, cishet-patriarchal society is only a type of environmental inhabitation, not a 'universal' mode that is reducible to our biology. The global structure of domination can and should be destroyed, because it is not a fixed, presumably adaptive feature of our life in a solely biophysical 'survival of the fittest' existence. For, while 'Man' is a maladaptive and destructive, exploitative feature of our existence, it is a sociogenically inStated force, born in colonial civilizational

of contemporary ecological catastrophes: *European colonialism and neocolonialism*. It naturalizes Western violences by framing them as somehow rooted in our species' biology – and therefore as something we all evenly partake in and should all equally be held responsible for. This is even more dangerous for Black people because whiteness then turns around and blames our 'population numbers' and 'birth rates' for modern environmental death, making us the fleshy spectacle of the supposed 'human' ecological vices of resource mismanagement, political corruption, social backwardness, etc. that *they* actually represent when you really think about it. The result: misanthropic calls for humanity to die that really just support eugenicist policies that aim to further control us – and frame *genocide* as a climate solution.

The words of Huxley, along with mainstream biology and ecology, do not provide an adequate answer to the so-called 'Anthropocene' question. Sylvia Wynter answered that question better, which is why I quoted her above. Wynter teaches us that 'Man' is a *colonial* relation, not a 'natural' one. The anthropogenic question shouldn't be about discovering why evolution has made 'us' dominant. It should be about freeing both human and nonhuman 'Things' from the hold of the (white/Western) 'Man.'

Black Radical Traditions strive to fulfill this imperative by materially reorienting and symbolically redefining our species' relationships in the universe. A revolutionary redefinition and reorientation of our species with/in nature is possible because we understand that the 'place Man occupies' does not arise from our species' phylogeny or ontogeny (it is not founded in our collective biophysical makeup) but rather is *inStated via sociogeny*, and by white pursuits of power.

"*Sociogeny*" is a term that Frantz Fanon introduced, which the brilliant Sylvia Wynter has further unpacked for us. Fanon coined "sociogeny" to distinguish from phylogeny and ontogeny, which are so emphasized in white science. This distinction is about understanding what you would call our species' biological potentiality,

rather than focusing on what white scientists usually do — biological reductionism. In short, our ontogeny (such as our genetic makeup) has POTENTIAL for various types of relations and behaviors, but that does not mean our ontogeny is a DETERMINANT (or leading cause) of some single type of behavior for us as individuals or as a collective species. We are ecological entities as a species, yes, so our ‘nature,’ in a biophysical sense, is the material arena out of which our behaviors and relations arise. It’s not necessarily a reach to believe that what we do or how we act and treat one another, including other Things, comes from our genetic makeup or environmental contexts *to some degree*. But, it is a reach to say that our makeup is an inherent and primary cause of ‘human’ behaviors and identities; ontogeny is simply what makes certain modes of behavior POSSIBLE. Possibility and potentiality is not the same as automatic result or functionality.

We have to widen our analysis and see, as materialists, that our reality is more than just the biophysical component. Ecology also involves cultural, historical, political, and spiritual features of existence; these are enmeshed and entangled in it. Social reality comes in, with its mix of both external biophysical factors and cultural/spiritual ones, as well as historical and political ones, to *impact* which potentialities (made available by our ontogeny) are then expressed, activated, and encouraged over a duration of time for persons, populations, and the whole group.

This means there is a structure to what it means to be human, a structure that gives orders on how our species should behave, and how we impact the planet. Sylvia Wynter charges us with seeing this structure as different across ‘genres’ unique to certain locations and modes of production. The dominant structure in the modern world is one that she calls a ‘coloniality of being / truth / power / freedom.’ The fact that it is colonialism is hidden by scientists who keep trying to research and explain the “place of Man” in phylogenetic (and ontogenetic) or biological-reductionist terms.

Wynter emphasizes how the colonial structure makes *appeals* to biophysical realities, even if it is not reducible to them. Her main example is stuff like our brain’s natural punishment and reward systems, which the structure of colonial humanism appeals to by articulating a set of boundaries that game and dictate for us which biological potentialities we should or shouldn’t express (it encourages or suppresses certain behaviors and relations over others). A feedback loop occurs because then the entire society — and how we inhabit the environment — become ideologically defended by these appeals to the common person’s neurochemistry, which impacts and influences our makeup and other lived, bodily, ecological features of our existence. This, in turn, reifies (or reinforces) what was structurally imposed so it takes on the smoky appearance of the ontogenetic or natural/universal, even though it ain’t.

Wynter calls this a ‘sociogenic principle,’ and it is the correct way we understand ‘the place Man occupies’ in the universe because it helps us affirm that ‘Man’ is not in dominance because of ‘natural selection,’ like the social Darwinists and fascists keep saying. No, it is MASSA WHO HOUSES himself in the world by way of racism, imperialism, transmisia, disablism, and capitalism. Coloniality is the structure orienting and defining our being/bodies and the planet.

So, the ‘Anthropocene,’ the idea that our species has a unique and often detrimental catalog/history of environmental impact, is actually about what structural ‘genre’ (as Wynter calls it) of ecogeny prevails. That ‘genre’ is Western imperial-capitalism. **White supremacy is what is destabilizing the earth system, not ‘humanity.’**

Western colonialism gets its power and rule ‘overrepresented’ as the only realization of or at the apex of what it means to be ‘human.’ So it is by Eurocolonial capitalism that some powerful humans hierarchically relate to/above all the universe. Scientists and white people continue to disguise western Man as ‘natural’ and rooted in our whole species’ genetic code because they have no