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PROUDFLESH

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PROUD FLESH Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter

Greg Thomas

Welcome to the house of Sylvia Wynter. For this interview conversation, she received us physically and intellectually at her new home somewhere in Oakland, California. Was it this visit or another when we were met with the most amazing meal--to eat--as well as a monumental plate of ideas? It was a few moons ago but you'd never know. This talk was so fully, so completely engaging that it seemed like only a few minutes had passed by once we were done for the day, a perception which this record of it clearly belies. She covers so much material with each answer to each question prepared, often in advance of the asking. She strains to have us meet the call of her words with a response of understanding ("You see?" "You understand what I'm saying?" "The point that I'm trying to make is . . ."). She thinks and urges us to think and re-think as if our very lives depend on it--because they do! She invites us to affirm "our capacity to turn theory into flesh," laying it down here on Black Studies, Heresy, Fanon, Woodson, Dubois, Condoleezza, The Bell Curve, "September 11th," Colonialism, Marxism, Feminism, Humanism and, especially for this issue, Consciousness--just for example. Yours and ours "in the intellectual struggle," for sure, PROUD FLESH is oh-so-pleased to re-introduce you to Sylvia Wynter.

I. Fanon, "The Man," Humanism and "Consciousness"

PROUD FLESH:

At this point in your life's work, who could think of your writing without thinking of its critical thesis on "humanism," of Western humanism, or what it calls "Man," which also raises critical questions of "consciousness," does it not? And other questions, too, of course.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Such as, "Why does this meaning have to be put on being Black--this meaning of *non-being*?" These are the kinds of questions that you guys are going to ask. I beg you guys to go back and read about Copernicus, Galileo and so on. The Darwinian thing was a bit of a struggle, but not as much--strangely enough . . .

PROUD FLESH:

Yes, you consistently show how "the Copernican revolution" was one enabled by imperialist exploration-*cum*-exploitation or conquest. For undergraduates in Western universities, in particular, they simply stick the Copernicus issue

in the anthology of "modern Western philosophy," as a lesser textual concern, without dealing with it or its significance; I mean, with no context or explanation.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

They never even wanted to write about it! And why? Because I think they are aware of the implications, if taken seriously. That's how they took over the world. We have to take it all seriously.

YOU CANNOT SOLVE THE ISSUE OF "CONSCIOUSNESS" IN TERMS OF THEIR BODY OF "KNOWLEDGE." You just can't. Just as within the medieval order of knowledge there was no way in which you could explain why it is that certain planets seemed to be moving backwards. Because you were coming from a geocentric model, right? So you had to "know" the world in that way. Whereas from our "Man-centric" model, we cannot solve "consciousness" because "Man" is a purely ontogenetic/purely biological conception of being, who then creates "culture." So if we say "consciousness" is "constructed," who does the constructing? You see?

Whereas in Fanon's understanding of *ontogeny-and-sociogeny*, there's no problem. Do you see what I mean?

PROUD FLESH:

Isn't it such a tragedy, what has been done to Fanon's name? In the 1980s especially, when Fanon is revisited in academia in the West, it's a real moment of . . . ignorant exploitation.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

An ignorant exploitation--*to take what he had said into the terms of this Western system of knowledge . . .*

PROUD FLESH:

That's why they're only interested in just a few pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

SYLVIA WYNTER:

But they don't want to go to the fundamental issue. Once he has said *ontogeny-and-sociogeny*, every discipline you're practicing ceases to exist.

PROUD FLESH:

They never ever picked this up in the introduction. Of *Black Skin, White Masks*, not to mention *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and other work.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Never. Obviously then, just as the medieval order could not even consider that the Earth was not the center of the universe--because they looked and saw everything "moving" and so on and so forth; also, because they don't feel the goddamn Earth move, you know! [*Laughter*]

So that's what I mean when I say 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." Because it's very difficult to ever contradict the norm, whatever is the norm. And you know what this society has done to all of us? *WE WANT TO BUY INTO "NORMALCY," AS "NORMALCY" IS CONSIDERED WITHIN THE VERY TERMS OF THE VERY ORDER OF "KNOWLEDGE" WHICH HAS MADE US "DEVIANT!"* [*Laughter*] You see what I'm trying to say? And yes, so it is "logical." Right? But this is how the system traps you.

PROUD FLESH:

And the role of contempt and fear in this conformity is enormous. Especially when the question is posed--once it is all laid out so nicely: "What are you, we going to do not to be trapped, to go against this society and these norms?"

SYLVIA WYNTER:

And how can you survive? Once you begin to do it, you *are* going to be in trouble.

PROUD FLESH:

When you were first told that we were going to do this e-journal, *PROUD FLESH: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness*, you replied: "Yes! Consciousness." Like, "That's key!" There are also two essays in particular of direct interest here, written or published since then. There is "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and 'What It's Like to Be Black'" (2001). You use the very nice phrases "orders of consciousness" and "modes of mind." This stands out for us, and the way you bring back Steve Biko (or his work on Black consciousness) into our discussions. There was also "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man" (2001). Could you sum up for us, then, why "consciousness" is key?

SYLVIA WYNTER:

I came to the conclusion that the question of "consciousness" cannot be solved within the terms of the Western system of knowledge, which is the system of knowledge in which the modern world is brought into existence. In a sense, then, to be "modern," to be "academics," we are all Westerners. I read where LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka in his wonderful *Blues People* (1963) said that we need to look at the West from a landscape outside the West . . .

PROUD FLESH:

Alright!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

And so I suddenly realized that that's what Black Studies *in its origin* had arisen to do. And then there's the question of course of [W.E.B.] DuBois's quote on "double-consciousness." We haven't really zeroed in on what he's saying. The implications.

PROUD FLESH:

As much as it is quoted, over and over again.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It's quoted, and yet still . . . He's really saying that to be an "American" and a "Man" he has to be anti-Negro; and, therefore, *he's struggling because he doesn't want to give up being an "American."* I had of course to put in the concept of "Man," which he doesn't use. He says to be an "American" and a "Negro." But I want to argue that to be an "American" is perhaps to be the fullest embodiment of this conception of the human, "Man" (in which we now realize ourselves). But his point was the tension between the two, and the struggle to be not anti-Negro. That is where the idea of "consciousness" comes in.

And then more and more, examining myself, examining in my own instinctive reactions to value and so on, there is no way in which I can avoid the fact that I am born into a world in which everything Black has been

negatively marked; and everything white has been positively marked. Although I can re-think myself, there are reflex valuations that I continually carry. I suddenly began to see what DuBois was trying to get at and what Fanon was going to get at with Black "self-alienation," which is that "*I have a consciousness that does not function for my best interest!*" THERE HAS TO BE A WAR AGAINST "CONSCIOUSNESS." BLACK STUDIES WAS A WAR! Against what Larry Neal called "the white thing within us" [in "The Black Arts Movement," from Addison Gayle, Jr.'s *The Black Aesthetic* (1971)].

PROUD FLESH:

Yessss.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It's a recognition of a profound war with yourself, and therefore with a mode of being human. So when Fanon says, "Black self-alienation is not an individual question; besides ontogeny, sociogeny," it makes perfect sense to me because I had been experiencing this contradiction between what I felt was true and what I'd been induced into: I had to see everything African negatively and therefore there was this reactive response. Then the concept of sociogeny, and socialization; and, of course, what is the function of education? Education from the initiation systems of traditional societies to academia is a process of socialization. The function of education is to reproduce the order of society.

On this question of "consciousness," if we think about the U.S. Supreme Court decision on "affirmative action," in a way it could seem like a victory. But looked at from the perspective of Black Studies, it's a profound evasion. As some of the conservatives are arguing (and I agree with them, in a way), where did "diversity" come from? BLACK STUDIES HAD NOT BEEN ABOUT ASKING FOR "DIVERSITY!"

II. Black Studies, "Mis-Education" and Carter G. Woodson

PROUD FLESH:

Exactly!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

I want to remind you of what Black Studies asked for. Gerald McWhorter in "The Case of Black Studies" [from Armstead Robinson, Craig Foster and Donald Ogilvie's *Black Studies and the University*] (1969), he said, "I would like to refer you to an essay by the late Dr. DuBois in *What the Negro Wants*, where he said that up until the point that he really came to terms with Marx and Freud he thought that truth wins. But when he came to reflect on the set of lived experiences that he had and the notions of these two men he saw that if one was concerned about surviving, about the good life and moving any society toward that, then you have to include a little something other than an interesting appeal to truth in some abstract universal sense." So he's contradicting the truth of what I had been taught about the negativity of everything Black and the positivity of everything white. Okay? The question then is the issue of "truth." Remember, he's saying this in '69. In the '70s [Michel] Foucault comes up with the idea of "truth and power," and he's saying the exact same thing. He's saying that every society has a *regime* of truth. So what our consciousness has been battling against, the regime of "truth" which has structured our "consciousness," is functioning against our best interests. It is negating ourselves; and so there's this constant struggle.

You see, it's not just an intellectual struggle. You could call it a psycho-intellectual struggle. Then you could understand why in the '60s it wasn't just a call for Black Studies; it was a call for Black Aesthetics, it was a call for Black Art(s), it was a call for Black Power. It was an understanding that, as Lewis Gordon has been the first to keep insisting, we live in an anti-Black world--a systemically anti-Black world; and, therefore, whites are not [simply] "racists." They too live in the same world in which we live. The truth that structures their minds, their "consciousness," structures ours. SO THE GREAT BATTLE NOW IS GOING TO BE AGAINST "THE TRUTH."

PROUD FLESH:

Hmmm.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

There was an article in *The New York Times* or somewhere where they had an argument showing this gap consistently in all tests between Black and white students. You can say, okay, the economic issue's there; and, of course, inferior schools and so on. But, nevertheless, amongst middle-class Blacks and whites, the same gap exists. Now, Claude Steele was the first social psychologist to try and ask, "Why is this?" Had he gone and looked at Woodson, Woodson had already told him why. Woodson said, "Look, it's the order of 'knowledge' itself." It's the regime of "truth." The very discipline of social psychology is a function of that part of the regime of "truth" of the order of "knowledge" that structures the "consciousness" that holds us together as members of the Westernized middle-classes. You see?

PROUD FLESH:

What love and respect we have for Woodson, his *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) most especially!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

What does he say? If you look at the system of "knowledge," in the curriculum, it's set up to motivate every white student and to de-motivate every Black student. The system of "knowledge" itself is what functions to motivate and to de-motivate. Notice, it motivates those who are to be at the top and it de-motivates those who are to be at the bottom. So you begin to say then, "What do our systems of 'knowledge' do?" And you begin to ask yourself, "How are human orders reproduced?" "How is it that each order is reproduced?" "Why must there be this "gap" between Black and white?"

If you look at it, *The Bell Curve* [by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, 1994] gave us an "explanation" as to why there is this gap. Okay? Because they are saying that the gap exists because of differential levels of inherited . . . whatever it is that you call it, "intelligence quotients." Now I want to make a distinction between whatever it is that you call "I.Q." at the level of individuals because if you've had children, you are amazed at the differences between them. But the differences are never along one line. There are different aptitudes and activities. So let's put the individual out of it. But how is it that you manage at the level of the group to get the gap produced? Suppose you change the question and ask, "How is the gap produced!?!?" Even if *The Bell Curve* were right. Where *The Bell Curve's* thing is very powerful: they're giving an "explanation." We've never given an explanation! But Woodson was giving an explanation. Do you see?

PROUD FLESH:

Oh, yes.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

We have not wanted to . . . [Laughter] . . . take up Woodson for a simple reason--in the same way as in the medieval order they saw the heavens through a geocentric model and, therefore, they could not explain why some stars seem to be moving backwards, because they couldn't imagine that it was from the perspective of a moving Earth that that appears to be so. Within the terms of our "biocentric" conception of being human, "consciousness" is "natural." We cannot ask ourselves then, "How is the gap produced?" The gap has to be "natural." Do you see what I mean? But if Fanon says, "besides ontogeny there is sociogeny," then it means that it is the institutions of a specific mode of sociogeny that calls for that gap to be produced; and the system of "knowledge" enacts the mode of sociogeny of every society--whatever is the conception of being human. If you're in the medieval order, the system of "knowledge" has to argue that the Earth is at the center of the universe--not just because we don't feel it move, but because after the Adamic "Fall" it became the abode of "fallen Mankind." "God" decreed it to be fixed in the universe as the dregs of the universe. This is how you're going to be thinking in the medieval order. So you're never ever going to imagine the Earth to move. Conceptually, since you are "fallen Man," your abode has to be fallen. Okay? To imagine that we have orders of "consciousness" we have to make another leap.

It means, if the human is a "purely biological" being, as we now assume, then how can you have different orders of consciousness? How could the people of medieval Europe have been "conscious" of the world in a totally different manner to their descendants in "America" today. Put the rest of out of the picture. Think of Europeans, right? The Western European of today has nothing to do with the Western European of the medieval order. It's a totally different order of consciousness. But to do that you cannot imagine that the human is "purely biological." With Fanon, you explain the order vis-à-vis a governing sociogenic principle that was/is instituting of the order of consciousness.

PROUD FLESH:

This also explains the negative reaction to Woodson when he first published *The Mis-Education of the Negro*; that is, when he first began to deliver the talks, publish the pieces and make the statements that would become the book.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

They can't look at it!

PROUD FLESH:

It was seen as a leap--out of *respectability*.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Out of respectability. In fact, someone like Steele (who's a social psychologist), he did wonderful experiments at Stanford because he asked himself, "Why did these middle-class, upper middle-class Black students begin to do so badly at Stanford?" He set up some tests for them. He found that whenever the tests had to do with their "intelligence," they would do very badly. But whenever it was just a plain test or something quite abstract, you know what I mean, that didn't reflect on their "intelligence," then things were roughly equal. He found the same would happen between European students doing math and Asians, because Asians are "supposed" be very good at math; and between men and women in some aspects. The same thing could be set up. So Steele isn't really seeing what Woodson talked about--degrees of motivation and de-motivation. How is he going to make that leap? Woodson is ruled out, even before he has started.

My thing is that what Black Studies should have been is a place where you

bring a Steele and a Woodson together. That would be the perspective from which you bring them together. Steele is going to have to begin to say to himself, the gap, the degrees of difference (usually about fifteen percent), should be proportional to the degrees motivation and de-motivation at the level of groups in the overall order of representation. So with all of these books about the representation of Africans and women and so on, you begin to see that these are not arbitrary things. These are a function of a whole behavior-motivational schema which is reproducing the order--all of us in our different places. Woodson has gone totally outside the concept that this is "natural." He is saying, "No. The function of the curriculum is to structure what we call 'consciousness,'" and therefore certain behaviors and attitudes.

PROUD FLESH:

That's why the system stigmatizes, even demonizes what it calls "drop-outs."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

In fact, if you notice what is now happening, the order no longer needs labor.

PROUD FLESH:

Right, it doesn't.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It is increasingly becoming automated. So masses and masses of people have to be pushed out, in Europe as well as here in the U.S. They have to be dropped out. Even this thing about "the new tests" is a mechanism to make sure you're going to be able to be dropped out "legitimately." If you keep the logic of the system going, they will be shut out of the economic order; and, as Maurice Godelier [French anthropologist and author of *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (1974) and *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999), for example] says, "to be shut out of the economic order is to be shut out of social existence." For the first time, social existence is defined in economic terms. This is becoming the enormous problem that the logic of the system cannot solve, that is, the great masses of people who have to be cast out. That is why so many Black men are in prison. See what I mean?

PROUD FLESH:

Yes.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

You're going to have to use the prison system to legitimate the logic of what I'm calling "Man," the logic of the reproduction of "Man," which over-represents itself as if it were "the human."

By the way, when I talk about the whole "bio-chemistry" thing (that is, the status-cum-semantic activation of the opiate reward and punishment neuro-chemical system of the brain), more and more work is being done that shows that in every order the lower echelons are the ones who die and have more diseases, especially those who are unemployed. They've done insightful work on this in places like Glasgow. The women at thirty look like old women. So what you're saying is that the reproduction of a hierarchy and the rankings are at the tremendous price of those who are expelled from the order. When are we going to be able to apply this knowledge to the homeless as well? What we can do is to go from the premise that "the personal dignity of the human cannot be sacrificed under any circumstances." Then we say, "How do we create a world?" I am arguing that you cannot do it in terms of "Man." You cannot do it in the logic of the order of consciousness of "Man."

III. "Yours in the Intellectual Struggle"

PROUD FLESH:

Okay, let us ask you then a question here that has to do with your signature.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

With what?

PROUD FLESH:

Your signature. Because a lot of the times when you sign things, letters and what not, you often sign them, "Yours in the intellectual struggle."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Yes, yes! [*Laughter*] Very much.

PROUD FLESH:

So it's synonymous with who you are.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

"Yours in the intellectual struggle." Because you know we do, as somebody said, we live in a materialistically metaphysical world! Everybody would say, "Words don't matter. What matters is action!" But think of what Woodson said. He said there would be no lynching if whites had not been taught. Who would lynch anybody? You see what I'm trying to say? He's trying to explain these *words*.

If our very being is always *bios* and *logos*, we are always in language, in words. It is the ability of language to correlate with the physical correlates of the brain that then constitutes us as human. WE ARE THE ONLY SPECIES THAT GOES AROUND AND SAYS, "I'M A NATURAL ORGANISM!" Okay? [*Laughter*] We can *say* we are a "natural organism" and we are a "natural organism" because we've defined ourselves as such, on the model of it. So that whereas St. Ignatius Loyola would engage in spiritual exercise, we come in where everything is exercise for the body--in spite of the fact of "Big Mac" and all of the other fast-food temptations which are making it a waste of time! [*Laughter*]

I reconceived what the Marxist called "superstructure." I could never see it as something separate from whatever it is you call "infrastructure." That is to say, what you call the "intellect" or systems of knowledge are inseparable from the empirical arrangements of any society. So the intellectual struggle means that. I believe that this had become clear, during the '60s and the anti-colonial struggle--although that has been played down because it was not a Western struggle. So they got us thinking about "post-coloniality" and Australia: Australia of course is settler-independent! You see, the settler-independence struggles of "America," the United States, Australia and so on, are *not* the same as the "*native*" independence struggles. *THE "NATIVE" INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLES HAVE TO TRANSFORM THE CONCEPTION OF THE HUMAN WHICH CLASSIFIES US "NATIVES."*

Think of this, think of this.

The Greeks separated the world into Greeks and "barbarians." You think of what happened. We happily call ourselves "people of color . . ."

PROUD FLESH:

I know!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

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 FLESH:

Yes!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It is able to make itself into the biological norm of being as long as we continue to think of the human as a purely biological being. You see?

I became an Occidentalist because the West has been looking at us so much, for so long; it never occurred to us to look back. Fortunately, when I was growing up and went to university, in London, of course the only thing to study was Europe! I was rather lucky in that my context or focus was Spain, and Portugal, not realizing that I was looking at the origins of the modern world. The Anglo world is not the origin of the modern world, although they present themselves as if they are. I began to realize that the West's taking over the world has actually been fundamentally carried out and sustained by Western intellectuals' control of "knowledge" from the sixteenth century until today. WHEN THE CALL FOR BLACK STUDIES CAME UP, THIS WAS THE FIRST PROFOUND CHALLENGE TO THE WESTERN INTELLECTUALS' CONTROL. But it became sort of mixed up because it was difficult to imagine that it wasn't really just a matter of wanting to have a Black aesthetic or a Black literary thing or "African-American" studies or "Black literary theory." [Laughter]

PROUD FLESH:

"Black" versions of white things.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Because "black/white" are already within these conceptions. But it is a question now of where there could be a space outside and beyond that. Also, if you see that it's not only "black" but "native," the word "native" really means the European is "generically human" and its "natives," "others."

I think the big breakthrough for me was when I began to realize the dimensions of the revolution that the lay or "secular" intellectuals of late medieval Europe had had to wage. I realized that without the revolution of renaissance humanism and religious reformation there could have been no modern world. Suppose I had said, "natives" and "blacks" are to the West's "Man" the analogue of the laity to the clergy; so that we are the bearers of "human otherness" to the West's conception of "Man." If we are the bearers of "human otherness," it means that the world of the human remains subordinated to the world of "Man." We are going to have to struggle for an entirely new definition of what it is to be human.

While we are destroying the planet--if you think how long humankind has existed all over the world, why was this so? John Davis has a wonderful point, in the book on exchange [*Exchange: Concepts in Social Thought*, 1992], when he says what really regulates human societies is the subject of each order wanting to be a good man or woman of your kind. We had a multiplicity of these kinds all over the world. When the West met the

Congolese, the Congolese couldn't imagine they [Westerners] were human. We forget that. The Hawaiians, for example, also had a totally different conception of what it was to be a good man and woman of their kind. The West has "unified" the world, but it has "unified" the world increasingly under one, what I call the "ethno-class" or Western bourgeois conception of what it is to be good man and woman of one's kind.

So everybody wants to be a millionaire!

IV. "911"

PROUD FLESH:

Clear.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Neo-liberalism is not just an economic thing that has spread all over the world. This is where "Bush" is becoming the bearer of this spread now, the total homogenization of the criteria. This is where the clash with Islam is interesting because Islam is saying, "No. there's another conception." But, you see, Islam has to go *back*. We're saying, "No. When Fanon says, 'for a new man,' this will be the first time you're going to have the full realization of what it is to be a good man or woman of one's *humankind*." Never in history has this ever happened. So how is this going to be worked out? We began to see this in the ways that people are mobilizing against the war. I think increasingly with all the information technology, when we imagine bombs dropping, we can begin to feel it in our own flesh.

This ability to *feel--with*; we're moving into another order of consciousness.

PROUD FLESH:

Now, you taught a special course at UC-Berkeley in the African Diaspora program on what has now come to be called "September 11th." How did this course come about, exactly, and what in general did you want to accomplish with this course?

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It was very important to understand that there is here a much more fundamental struggle than it appeared. Césaire had said in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), and you notice what Césaire is doing, it's really a Woodson thing, Césaire said, "there are some who have said that I am an enemy of Europe." But he said, "where have I ever denied the importance of Europe in human thought . . ."

PROUD FLESH:

"No return." He said it's not simply a matter of simply "returning."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

"Where have I ever said that there could be a return, any return?" What I wanted to say is that the challenge of the radical Islamists was a profound challenge to "Man," but it was based on the concept of a return. We are not going the same route. For us, it's not a return. IT IS A QUESTION OF GOING AFTER "MAN," TOWARDS THE HUMAN. The empirical conditions exist which demand now the transformation of consciousness, very much like Christianity at the end of Rome. Christianity came up with an entirely new order of consciousness, right? We are now called upon for this new order of consciousness, which therefore means a profound re-writing of knowledge; which comes back to Black Studies and the call for something other than

"truth" in an abstract and intellectual sense.

Look back at all the "Studies" that were called for, all the "Studies" that have come up. Each is saying, "Look at how I've been negatively represented." Suppose we ask, "What are the rules that govern those representations, and why?" You then begin to have the same "scientific" knowledge not simply of the physical and biological universe but of this third level of ontogeny-*sociogeny* existence. It would be "scientific" in a way quite different. As I said in the "Sociogenic Principle" article, our scientific knowledge would call for the "*subjective*" to be "*object*" of knowledge!" [Laughter] This is where we come back to when I said because we cannot trust our own "consciousness," this gives us a specific insight on how "consciousness" functions.

PROUD FLESH:

Right!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Whereas if we were the norm of the order, of course we'd trust our "consciousness!"

That's why as I said, I've always insisted only Blacks and homosexuals quite know the power of this because we have been socialized to experience ourselves in, one, negative sexuality; but the other one, goddamn it, in negative *being*!

PROUD FLESH:

I hear you.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Nevertheless, they are parallel insights. The danger for both of us is once we became the norm: I look with amazement at Condoleezza Rice. This sort of Roman *proconsul*! [Laughter] It just goes to show that there is no guarantee that even if you experience yourself in self-alienating terms, you will not push that out of the mind; it shows that there is no guarantee that you cannot be assimilated into seeing yourself in normative terms.

V. Condoleezza, "Roman *Proconsul*" or "black Margaret Thatcher"

PROUD FLESH:

She was the provost when you taught at Stanford? So did she oversee the dismantling of Black Studies there or not?

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It wasn't quite like that; I know I've heard that. It wasn't necessarily that. I think she would not have been against Black Studies, as such, but like most Black academics she would have just seen it as a sort of add-on.

How she came to Stanford, you know, I had a little thing to do with--not her, I didn't know her! After St. Clair Drake had been the head of the program, I had taken it over. I was distressed at how the Black students who were coming in now at this time were so apolitical; they knew nothing about politics. I thought what we needed in the program was a Black political scientist who could do monthly seminars, monthly discussions. I would go and see the people in Political Science. I tried to make my case. Then I went away for a year and, when I came back, they had appointed a

Which brings us back to "re-writing knowledge," the task stated first, it seems, in your piece, "*No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues*" (1992).

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Why is it that as intellectuals we can disagree so much with what is being done, and yet it is we who create the rules of the discourse that make these behaviors possible? This is the universal aspect of our struggle, which is that of intellectuals wherever we may be. But, as you know, there's this unique experience. I was thinking to myself: My granddaughter at this moment, she thinks she owns the world. I want to keep looking at her face to see when it changes. Part of my urgency is to make sure . . . I don't want that to change! But I do know that within the logic of our present system of "knowledge" there is no way in which it will not change. On the other hand, how do I grapple with this enormous sense of innocence that academics have; this sense that we are always "the good guys." Especially on the Left, we are "the good guys" against this evil capitalism--out there! How can I persuade them that the great changes in history come when, for example, some Jewish priests who were then exiled and captive in Babylon after the latter's imperial conquest of their homeland began to ask, "What have we done wrong?" Then came up with Genesis 1.

PROUD FLESH:

To go back, briefly, to Condoleezza Rice ("this sort of Roman *proconsul*"), you've described her as "a 'black' Margaret Thatcher" as well. Could you elaborate?

SYLVIA WYNTER:

What I mean by "a 'black' Margaret Thatcher." You see, I think one of the most difficult classes to come to terms with in modern society is the class from which most of *us* come from, which is what they call the "lower middle-class." Notice people like Hitler. You cannot understand Hitler or Stalin except knowing that they come from that stratum. It's a very difficult stratum to belong to because you are always wanting to be that normative middle-class and you're terrified of falling into the negation of non-middle classness. It seems to me a lot of work has to be done about the temptations of that class; and they are temptations that we all experience. How does one escape it? There is almost a fascist temptation. You've done everything so correctly. You've got opportunities, but they're cramped. So you could see this in a Thatcher. She used to live above the store, her father's grocery. And you see this in a Condoleezza, a rigidity; even the hair is rigid! You sit back and you say, "This is how they're used against the others." And yet I don't want to go pour everything on her, you understand? I'm just profoundly sad in a way. [Colin] Powell's problem is that they're not sure that he's quite quite absolutely safe . . .

PROUD FLESH:

This is another reason why Elaine Brown's book is so important: *The Condemnation of Little B: New Age Racism in America* (2002), where both of them (and others) are listed as "New Age House Negroes" and "New Age House Negresses," of course.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Elaine Brown's book goes back very much to the best of the '60s. It goes back to Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*. It is the *condemnation* of Little B; and the moment you are thinking of Little B, well, where does the condemnation come from? Where does the *damnation* come from? How do we think condemnation? To think "condemnation" is to think "election." So Condoleezza Rice is "elected" and Little B is "condemned." You see what I'm

trying to say? What are the processes at work that allows for or that *needs* this? Because you need the "exceptional" Black to prove that all the Blacks in the prison are right to be there. So how do you resist the temptation to be the "exceptional" Black? And it is very, very difficult because everything is heaped on you, if you are the "exceptional" Black.

PROUD FLESH:

And it's this "exceptional" Black who is to "represent" "Black America" for the middle-classes, internationally, not the Little B's.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Not the Little B's. That is why I was so sad when I was reading about "affirmative action." You know, that "diversity" escape-hatch has to be destroyed. The conservatives are quite right: Where did "diversity" come from, all of sudden? The real issue was about a total, racial inferiorization or subordination which is continued in the very body of knowledge itself. THAT IS WHY BLACK STUDIES COULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO EXIST AS BLACK STUDIES. EITHER YOU BECAME AN ETHNIC STUDIES OR YOU'RE WIPED OUT. I do believe in going back to Black Studies to recognize that Black Studies is really in the forefront of the battle against "Man" and for the human, and to begin to put it forward in that reconception. Going back to, as Larry Neal said, "the white thing within us," which means the order of "consciousness" within us.

I believe that people like you and your generation, you have an extraordinary destiny, in a sense, before you. I really do believe that except that we can replace a "Man-centric" world with a "human-centric" one... Look at what is happening to Africa. What is happening to Africa is the direct result of the "Man-centric" world in whose terms we live. The Thatcher/Condoleezza thing, I'd love to see someone do a study on that. The whole thing of examining that stratum, of all of us, including many of the leaders in Africa like a Charles Taylor. What are the temptations of that group to become the tools of that which is destroying us as a population group?

VI. Feminism, Gender--Genre--and Marxism

PROUD FLESH:

This may be a very good place for us to redress questions of gender and your thinking circulated among some conventional critics who fail to read you in any serious way. Elaine Brown addressed this question in an interview with us as she addressed the former U.S. "National Security Advisor" and current U.S. "Secretary of State," for Bush II.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

It is not that I am against feminism: I'm appalled at what it became. Originally, there was nothing wrong with my seeing myself as a feminist; I thought it was adding to how we were going to understand this world. If you think about the origins of the modern world, because gender was always there, how did we institute ourselves as humans; why was gender a function of that? I'd just like to make a point here that is very important. Although I use the term "race," and I have to use the term "race," "race" itself is a function of something else which is much closer to "gender." Once you say, "besides ontogeny, there's sociogeny," then there cannot be only one mode of sociogeny; there cannot be only one mode of being human; there are a multiplicity of modes. So I coined the word "genre," or I adapted it, because "genre" and "gender" come from the same root. They mean "kind," one of the meanings is "kind." Now what I am suggesting is that "gender" has

always been a function of the instituting of "kind." For example, in our order, which is a bourgeois order of kind, a bourgeois order of the human, the woman was supposed to be the housewife and the man was supposed to be the breadwinner. Each was as locked into their roles. By making the feminist movement into a bourgeois movement, what they've done is to fight to be equal breadwinners. This means that the breadwinning man and the breadwinning woman become a new class, so that the woman who remains in her role becomes a part of a subordinated class.

I am trying to insist that "race" is really a code-word for "genre." Our issue is not the issue of "race." Our issue is the issue of the genre of "Man." It is this issue of the "genre" of "Man" that causes all the "-isms."

What we are witnessing is the *incorporation* of the bourgeoisie. You are incorporated like Skip Gates has become incorporated--if I use him, I am just using him as the very model of someone who has been incorporated into academia; and, to be honest with you, as has Cornel West who, for all his "radical" talk, has become incorporated. I can honestly say that nobody ever thought I was totally incorporable! [Laughter] I'm happy, I do agree with them: I would not incorporate myself either, if I were in their shoes!

What I have been trying to work through is this whole idea of "genre." Because, you see, when Césaire resigned from the Communist Party, he said that our issue cannot be made into a subset of any other issue; and so I've been saying, "What is our issue?" And our issue is the "genre" of the human. So when Black Studies came up, when this guy called for another order of "truth" (because every genre has an order of "truth"), what he was calling for was this. Now when I speak at a feminist gathering and I come up with "genre" and say "gender" is a function of "genre," they don't want to hear that. Look at the tremendous perks that feminism has given to some Black women, for example, and "of color" women as they call themselves. Right? This is what I am trying to say about the temptations, you see; and then you say you're a "Black feminist," but what is happening to Black women? Most Black women are not getting married, you know? What I call the "J-Lo" syndrome . . .

PROUD FLESH:

Yes!?!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

We knew it in the Caribbean. Black Americans didn't know it. But the "J-Lo" syndrome comes and she uses Puffy, right? She goes to the top, right? She now becomes the in-between norm of the order and, therefore, you come back to this ladder: white women as the "absolute" thing; the "J-Lo," the sort of "exotic concubine" type; and then Black women at the bottom of this thing. Now *that* is the Black women's issue. But when I tried to write a paper and say that that is our issue, it was supposed to be published and the feminist editor at Routledge, I think (although the Black women editors there accepted it), wouldn't take it. That's when I realized, "Good heavens, just as we had to fight Marxism, we're going to have to fight feminism."

PROUD FLESH:

Orthodoxy.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

That's when I realized that. Black women's struggle is quite other. Our struggle as Black women has to do with the destruction of the genre; with the displacement of the genre of the human of "Man," of which the Black population group--men, women and children--must function as the negation.

PROUD FLESH:

In other words, we still need to come "out of the closet of closed systems" of thought, as you put it in an unpublished conference paper, "Beyond Liberal and Marxist-Leninist Feminisms" in 1982. This was also the crux of "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" (1990), your "After/Word" to Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido's collection, *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

I was so delighted with them. Mind you, they did say that they were coming from different perspectives--Carole and Fido. But they were making sure to keep all of these perspectives. I was very happy and very pleased because I knew that nowhere else . . . It's amazing how suddenly you got a party line! You must remember, I had come up from a place where I knew that Marxism had a party line; and so you have to struggle against a party line. I found that once I began becoming serious about whatever it was you call "race," friends I'd had who were Marxist were no longer friends.

PROUD FLESH:

Yes.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

For them, the hegemonic thing had to be class. It still has to be class. As long as you accept that "Man" is a biological being, the bourgeoisie always wins; because this is *its* description. That's why capitalism, by the way, wins--because capitalism calls for a bourgeois conception of being human.

It's very difficult to be a Marxist and not be a member of the bourgeoisie yourself . . . to experience yourself normatively, not "illegitimately." You know what I mean? To consider yourself always "illegitimate." Not because you want to say this in any congratulatory sense. I know I would have to look at my granddaughter's face for that change; and I know that as long as I'm in a bourgeois conception of being, a change will come. So I have to make a choice: Do I want to defend this conception of being, even though it's given me enormous perks and enormous freedoms and so on, or do you kind of feel, "No. The price is too much." Like the condemnation of Little B, also. You have to say, "What are the costs?"

PROUD FLESH:

You granddaughter's face now forever as the cover of that book. That equation.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Exactly. Exactly.

In fact, the condemnation, also, of the Earth. People refuse to understand that before the anti-colonial struggles you didn't really have an acute problem of the environment. You had the white European settler world, they used the rest of the world as their hinterlands to exploit. The rest of the world didn't have an economic system for themselves. Then the anti-colonial struggles, the Chinese revolution, Indian independence . . . so now everybody is supposed to have an economic system for themselves. We're now out-fishing the seas. The tremendous transformation of global warming and climate change has enabled us to see that as long as we continue to all want to be good men and women of the Western-bourgeois kind, wherever we are in the world, we will destroy the world. We'll destroy the planetary environment, and therefore our only possible habitat as a species! The condemnation of Little B and the condemnation of our planetary environment are totally interlinked.

VII. Poetics, "Re-Writing Knowledge" or Heresy (with Rhythm)

PROUD FLESH:

Tell us what it's been like to present these anything but orthodox ideas at academic conferences over the years? I once heard you say, I believe at the "Engaging Walter Rodney's Legacies" conference in Binghamton, "I expect blows."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

You expect blows. The way I've come to think, I didn't set out to go there. It was that I found myself impelled. Had I not come to the United States, I could have never have come to think like this. It's the anti-colonial movement, then the '60s movement and then being here in the United States which is now the center of world power.

I began life as a writer. I came into academia, it wasn't my first choice. For a long while I had wanted to be a dancer; I wanted to be an actress, all these things. Then I began writing because I couldn't get parts for myself!

PROUD FLESH:

Except as "Pharaoh's concubine," as you've said!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

So I started writing plays. [*Laughter*] But after awhile, writing became more important. I went back to the Caribbean. Because I had to make a living for my children, that's how I went to teach at the University of the West Indies. Then I began writing for *Jamaica Journal* and so on. I always thought my real work was writing for *Jamaica Journal* and inside the university teaching was my job, your bread-and-butter job.

PROUD FLESH:

Your "slave."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Then what happened in the '60s here was the Black Studies thing and that's how I came. I was asked to come; and I'd become interdisciplinary, by the way. I came to give certain lectures. I went to Michigan to give a mini-course. I was invited to come to UC-San Diego where they had a "Literature, Society and the Third World" program. Sherley [Anne] Williams [author of *Dessa Rose*, 1986], she invited me to come. She was the head of the program at that time. When I went there I realized there was a problem with the "Third World." Most of the Chicanos were Marxist. Therefore, with them, there was always a coming together of the whites, and so on, versus the Blacks. I had to realize there wasn't any "Third World" thing. EVERYONE ASSUMED THAT THE BLACK WAS SOMEONE WHO WAS THERE; THEY HAD A STRUGGLE; YOU JOIN THEIR STRUGGLE; AND YOU PUSH THEM OVER AND MOVE OVER THEM TO THE TOP. I call it the "J-Lo" syndrome!

PROUD FLESH:

[*Laughter*]

SYLVIA WYNTER:

So that meant when Stanford invited me to come, I was open to going into a Black Studies program. I was still Marxist enough to have preferred a "Third

World" formulation. Everything has been like a learning process. For me, the great years of my thinking was really beginning at San Diego and when at Stanford I had to bring together a Black Studies perspective. I was appointed in Spanish and Portuguese. I had begun to put the focus on the origins of the modern world and the changes that they had in Spain and in their literature there. That enabled me to bring together the perspective. So much of my thinking came out of those years at Stanford. That having to go back to the origin, rethinking everything. Beginning from that beginning then began to change everything.

To understand the struggle that we are faced with, we have to go back. As long as the State was hegemonic and the ideal was "order" and "stability," the idea was that people who owned landed property were the ones who had the stake--they couldn't take their "capital" and go away; and, therefore, they were able ostensibly to take rational decisions for the "common good." The bourgeoisie had to take "self-interest," which had been delegitimated in the earlier formulation, and make it now like "gravity!" You see what I'm trying to say? The fundamental moment comes when the formulation of a general order of existence is changed. Look at the Haitian Revolution and see how instrumental it was in deconstructing the landed gentry formulation and enabling the rise of the bourgeoisie. So in a way the bourgeoisie and the slaves were fighting in the same cause although the bourgeoisie were actually buying and selling the slaves! Their interest was not in land-holding. They now began to own capital and so on.

The point I'm making is that you begin to see that no order can exist except as it exists within the logic of a formulation of a general order of existence; and this is elaborated by intellectuals, whether theologians or shamans or ourselves. Okay?

The "world systems" [analysis associated with Immanuel Wallerstein] is good in that what it is showing is the way in which, looked at in economic terms, you have different divisions of labor. But for these to be, you already have a Western-bourgeois formulation of a general order; and you therefore also have a secular conception of being "human." So that your "*indio*" and your "*negro*," one who began as serf labor and one who began as slave labor, they're already the "human Other" to the self-conception of "Man" as political subject. It's "Prospero & Caliban." "Prospero & Caliban" is the sort of identity apparatus being instituted at the same time as the economic apparatus is a function of that institution of identity, the whole thing.

THE HERESY THAT I'M PUTTING FORWARD IS THAT CAPITALISM IS ITSELF A FUNCTION OF THE REPRODUCTION OF "MAN," THAT "MAN" WHOSE CONCEPTION WE INSTITUTE IN OUR DISCIPLINES. So then you can understand why I'd expect blows?!

PROUD FLESH:

Yes!

SYLVIA WYNTER:

[*Laughter*]

PROUD FLESH:

And you found that you were able to focus in on these processes more when you were no longer teaching, at Stanford. Most academics look forward to retirement so they can *stop* producing! You see your production as freed up in part by your exit from academia or "the professoriat."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Exactly. When I became most heretical was, I remember, in 1984. I had gone to Jamaica to work on a project. You know, the Columbus

["Quincentenary"] thing was coming out. Columbus had been shipwrecked on the island of Jamaica for a year; and he had written a famous letter from there. His son had founded a town. The town had been shifted. When the English captured the island, all memories of the Spanish were wiped out. The town was to become buried under a sugar cane plantation. So Spanish archaeologists were digging up this city; and the idea was to start a tourist attraction. That took me right again back to the origins. After traveling for a year and working on it, I came back to Stanford and taught a course, "Race, Discourse and the Origin of the Americas." That was then put on at the Smithsonian at a 1992 symposium on 1492. I would say that, in a way, the real shift in my thinking begins there.

Then when I came back in 1984 I was writing a paper for William Spanos [the former editor of *Boundary 2*], a wonderful man, a really wonderful person. The '60s afterglow was still there. This was "The Ceremony Must Be Found" (1984). That was my real breakthrough. At the time I was actually beginning to use a computer, a PC! I remember one day I sat back and realized that I was crossing a frontier. Have you ever had that?

PROUD FLESH:

Ah . . . yeah.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Things would never be quite the same. In that essay, I think you can see where the crossing begins. I continued working, especially with 1992 coming around. I used that a lot. I went around and gave lectures. But I think it was when I was retired that gradually I had to begin to understand something about how powerfully the function of any system of knowledge is. I realized that, however much one had tried, when you're actually trying to teach, draw up your courses; write letters of recommendations for students, understand they have to get jobs, understand the system as they have to get through it, the very act of doing it means that thinking can only go so far. Isn't that strange? It's very interesting. I found that it was as I was now on retirement (I had gradually stopped teaching; in 1998 I stopped teaching altogether) that I began to really push to see that it was the system of knowledge itself; it's not a matter of what you can do inside it. You really had to come to this. That's when I became, I would say, heretical.

The enormous intellectual revolutions that brought in the modern world, when you talk about the renaissance humanism and how they went back to Greece and Rome and so on, they were going back for an alternative political space and political model. Now I am doing the same now with Africa. The first writing on the flesh; that is, the first origins of the techniques of *humanization*, by means of ritual practices such as circumcision. I am going back thousands and thousands of years to suggest that we institute ourselves as humans, so you begin to have a different model of human origins as that of an Event which took place on the continent of Africa, the Event of our entrance into Ogotomêlli's Word [see Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotomêlli*, 1965], the Word of religion, made flesh.

Just as the West enables what Marcel Gauchet calls the exit from religion [in *The Disenchantment of the Word: A Political History of Religion*, 1985], for me, Black Studies is about enabling the exit from the substitute religion "evolution," a substitute religion which represses the fact that once language had co-evolved with the brain, the process of evolution was followed by the Event of human auto-institution, of autopoiesis! As Fanon said, Black people are looked upon as "the stage between monkey and Man." It is we who have to destroy this. Hitherto, every species, if it wanted to change its behaviors, had to go through the long processes of evolution by which it would change its physiology. WE'RE THE ONLY BEINGS THAT CAN CHANGE OUR BEHAVIORS WITHOUT CHANGING OUR PHYSIOLOGY. NOBODY ASKS WHY THIS IS SO! NOBODY ASKS WHY THIS IS SO! ONCE YOU ASK THIS,

EVERYTHING CHANGES.

PROUD FLESH:

On that note, we went back and read your "Ethno or Socio Poetics" (1976).

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Oh? That was so long ago!

PROUD FLESH:

You say there that poetics or *poesis* is so important not as some narrow, literary affair but because it tends to signify all these repressed or stigmatized orders of cognition, ones which differ profoundly from our now orthodox, linear modes of thinking or theorizing.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Yes!

PROUD FLESH:

In terms of what's working toward an alternative consciousness, could this insight (of "Ethno or Socio Poetics") account for the on-going currency of the poetry of Black popular musics, spoken word traditions and what not?

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Why are they so important? What are they doing? Essentially, they're actually part of the process by which we are transforming the *poesis* of being.

What I'm suggesting is that there's *the autopoiesis of sociogeny*.

Power is always linked to the *poesis* of being. There's never been a ruling class that did not embody the ideal of what it is to be good man and woman of your kind! We now live in the *poesis* or *autopoiesis* of "Man." How can we bring all the knowledge we have gained into *the autopoiesis of the human*? For the first time, the human has to recognize itself not just as physiologically a species but phenomenologically as a unit; as a "we" or to borrow from Islam, as an "*umma*," but this time one of the human, after "Man."

PROUD FLESH:

So we can make the connection between what you call *poesis*, the breaking down of the status-quo order of "Man" and something like dub poetry, for example.

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Exactly! The whole world is organized about this aesthetics of rhythm, you know? It's sweeping everywhere. I'm amazed at the young people of the world, they live in music. They carry these "Walkmen." They're sharing the same stars, the extraordinary knowledge that they have about this music. What we are trying to do is something that's happening. You could call it *the new autopoetics of cognition*--when a Billie Holiday sings; the dub poets or the rappers, and its not only their songs but their style which is all over the world and everybody is living that kind of way. Obviously this is a question of what it is to be a good man or woman of your kind in different ways. There is the orthodox way, which is to think economically, and then there's the thing of, "How do we live our lives?" And I can't help feeling that the role of Black music has been to bring the spiritual into the secular. The whole idea of "Soul." In Fanon's concept, the belief in "spirit" or "soul" is a scientific concept; there is this other thing (consciousness, spirit, soul, even mind)

that the body makes possible but which is not a property of the body itself. This is happening in the music; and the paradox is that capitalism is carrying it! All over the world! By means of its market-driven, invented technologies.

PROUD FLESH:

[*Laughter*] Okay, finally, for the record, what's your theoretical relationship to Aretha Franklin?! Once, you said, maybe paraphrasing, slightly, "When I write, I want to sound in theory the way Aretha Franklin sounds in song."

SYLVIA WYNTER:

Yes, I think, I WOULD LIKE TO FEEL THAT EVERYTHING I SAID HAD A LIBERATING AND EMANCIPATORY DIMENSION. That's what she has. Black singing, at its best, it has this--like Gospel. That I wanted. But also I was always aware that it wasn't that I was thinking anything linearly. It never came linearly. It tends to come the way a flower blooms. It comes unexpectedly; and it has nothing to do with "genius." It has to do with this beginning to question your own "consciousness." It's the idea of *poesis*, again; there is also a *poesis of thought*; a *new poesis of being human*. These concepts don't come in a linear fashion. They build up. They build up, you know? So as you're talking they build up and they build up the way music builds up and up and up until you get that sudden . . .

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