MThZ 75 (2024) 123–136

Homo Interpretans

On Daston, Augustine, Wynter

by Matthew Elia

Für Lorraine Daston sehnt sich der Mensch nach dem Besitz einer Wissensformation, welche die Begrenztheit unserer Spezies überschreitet. Nach einer kurzen Einführung dieses umfassenderen Projektes – eines Überdenkens der Solidaritätskonzeption für das Anthropozän –, wird ein Programm für die philosophische Anthropologie skizziert, das (in Anlehnung an Johann Michel) *homo interpretans* genannt wird und den Menschen als hermeneutisches Tier versteht. Ziel ist es, die Hermeneutik der Offenbarung in zwei neue Richtungen zu lenken: erstens, indem Dastons Behauptung (die Theologie verfolge die Erkenntnistheorie) als Eröffnung eines neuen Blickwinkels auf den eigenen *locus classicus* der christlichen Hermeneutik, Augustins *De Doctrina*, dient; zweitens, indem gezeigt wird, wie wichtig diese unwahrscheinliche Konvergenz von christlicher Hermeneutik und moderner Wissenschaftsgeschichte für die Aufgabe ist, Solidarität gegenwartssensibel inmitten einer rassisch kategorisierenden Moderne neu zu denken. Dabei wird dafür argumentiert, dass Dastons obige Behauptung zugleich brillant (Teil 1) und seltsam (Teil 2) ist. Die Reflexion auf die Rolle des Menschen innerhalb der Menschheit erfährt dabei eine Flankierung durch eine kurze suggestive Auseinandersetzung mit dem Begriff der des *homo narrans* im Werk der schwarzen feministischen Theoretikerin Sylvia Wynter (Teil 4).

1. On Solidarity and Interpretation

"Solidarity," Adorno writes, "is sick."[1] It was "once intended to make the talk of brotherhood real, by lifting it out of generality, where it was an ideology, and reserving it for the particular." Solidarity once animated "groups of people who together put their lives at stake, counting their own concerns as less important in face of a tangible possibility." Now solidarity is caught – trapped and itself a kind of trap. The best of solidarity, its reality and specificity, its finding a home in "the particular, the Party, as the sole representative in an antagonistic world of generality," has decayed into mere partisan loyalty, corroded to the "bluffly obedient resignation" which the Party's "organization men" aim to extract from "the honest intellectual … who wants nothing to do with prison wardens."[2] Such is solidarity's sickness for the intellectual under *damaged life*, Adorno's poignant subtitle: trapped and itself a kind of trap, a double bind which somehow must refuse on one side a

[1] *Theodore Adorno*, Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, London 2006, 51.
[2] Ibid., 51 f. 'Prison wardens' is my amended translation of Jephcott's archaism, 'gaolers.'

useless universality and on the other a degraded particularity – patriotism, chauvinism, party loyalty.

Critical thought – here presented in the figure of Theodore Adorno – has often found itself at once seduced by solidarity and repelled. The problem is not just that the concept of solidarity remains notoriously murky and undertheorized and endlessly malleable in its definitions, as nearly every treatment points out, always promising that *this* treatment at last will smooth out its wrinkles, clarify its ambiguities. It is that the very notion of solidarity, of oneness with a group, stands in a fraught relationship with the structural conditions needed for a critical vantage in the first place—namely independence, a place beyond the group. "Never solidarity without criticism," Edward Said wrote in *Representations of the Intellectual*.[3] Or to sharpen the antinomy: the problem of solidarity for thought, or at least for thinkers, is that such people must somehow stand inside and outside at once. *Inside* the very forms of relation, commitment, and fidelity which furnish thought with concreteness, relieve it of the illusions of detachment from ordinary life that Bourdieu called "the scholastic disposition," render it, in theory at least, plausibly connected to the work of justice.[4] Yet *outside* such relations too, for the reasons Said and Adorno bring into view: thought is useless if it has no recourse to critique, to a reference point beyond the consensus of the already inside. Caught between in and out, particular and general, solidarity poses a conceptual problem for thought and a practical dilemma for thinkers.

In the wider book project of which this paper is a part, I have been struggling to write my way toward a therapeutics for solidarity's many ailments. Ubiquitous contemporary calls for solidarity of some group *x* (often 'privileged') with some other group *y* (often 'marginalized') tend to presume we know in advance what solidarity is, and the issue lies only with 'applying' it to various contexts. A deeper issue lies beneath these presumptions, one which, I am suggesting in this paper, offers us a different angle onto the sickness raised above: What sort of animal is the human creature in the first place, such that solidarity is possible for us to imagine, let alone enact? Pressing toward an ethics I'm calling *Solidarity as a Way of Life,* I enlist three disciplines of inquiry to pursue that question: (1) evolutionary anthropology, illumined and sharpened by history of science and philosophy of science approaches, represented in what follows in the figure of Lorraine Daston; (2) theological anthropology in the Augustinian tradition; and (3) the critical theoretical interventions of Black Studies, a tradition of inquiry into 'the human' arising from the underside of colonial modernity in writers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and (in what follows here) Sylvia Wynter.[5] Synthesizing these three markedly disparate disciplines is no simple task. The payoff for doing so consists, first, in contributing to the difficult work of the emerging field of 'science-engaged theology' by centering the previously-neglected topic of hermeneutics (about which, more below), and second, in disrupting precisely this field by opening it to encounter from a tradition of inquiry – Black Studies – to which I accord

---

[3] *Edward Said*, Representations of the Intellectual, New York 1996, 32.
[4] *Pierre Bourdieu*, Pascalian Meditations, Stanford 1997, 12.
[5] Here I am introducing the natural sciences as a conversation partner to my synthesizing approach to constructive ethical thought, after my first book project brought together Augustinian politics and Black Studies in *Matthew Elia*, The Problem of the Christian Master. Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery, New Haven 2024 [forthcoming].

something like an epistemic priority of the oppressed.[6] In this way, a more richly articulated anthropology offers a fresh vantage onto how the 'hermeneutics of revelation' makes contact with, and is mediated through, our humanness – including the biophysical structures of perception proper to the sort of animals we are. In this paper I thus trace a common thread across the three discourses mentioned, a thread with relevance for treating the hermeneutics of revelation by addressing the 'sickness' of solidarity problem raised above – of charting a path between a useless universalism and a degraded particularism. That common thread is the shared insistence that the human is an irreducibly *hermeneutic animal,* an animal who by its very nature ceaselessly depicts and represents, narrates and interprets.

The name for that common thread – *homo interpretans* – I borrow from philosopher Johann Michel's recent work, which extends and transforms the anthropological theme of Ricœur's philosophical project into "an anthropology of human being as an interpreting being, as an ordinary person faced with symbols and signs with double meanings" which thus call forth the activity of interpreting, of "unveiling the meanings in polysemic signs."[7] I find Michel's work salient for the problematic laid out above in three ways. First, his anthropological conception of *homo interpretans* aims to inhabit a borderland between the universal and the particular, the very site of solidarity's sickness for Adorno.

> "Interpretive anthropology requires that we look in two directions. On the one side, at the universal and invariable conditions of interpretation without which the concept of Homo interpretans would lose all relevance…On the other, at the particular (historic, social, cultural) conditions under which interpretive activity is manifested."[8]

The universal condition for interpretation, for Michel, is the inevitable situation arising whenever and wherever "people are confronted with anything that disrupts the orderly flow of the immediate understanding of meaning."[9] The particular conditions involve attending closely to the "the ordinary techniques used by men and women to cope with the opacity of the signifying world." Crucially, these techniques include something like a 'universal' set of methods ("asking for clarification, putting things in context, placing them within a narrative"), but methods that afford a wide range of highly particular "cognitive schemas that are acquired through contact with cultural systems."[10] Second, this framework of attending to the space between universal and particular makes possible the intervention I want in solidarity discourse: that to reconsider solidarity as presuming an anthropological question (that is: a 'what sort of animal *x*, such that *y*' type of question) is to posit an animal who pays attention to the ordinary forms of relation in which she is already enmeshed, and

---

[6] For one recent statement of the sort of philosophical argument underlying this claim, see *Lidal Dror*, "Is there an epistemic advantage to being oppressed?", in: Nous 57/3 (2023) 618–640.
[7] *Johann Michel*, "Anthropology of Homo Interpretans,", in: Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies 8/2 (2017) 9–21, here 11.
[8] Ibid., 13.
[9] Ibid., 16.
[10] Ibid., 18. In the wider project, I problematize how Michel brings together the universal and the particular, finding an alternative in the notion of universal capacities as "ethical affordances" for particular social histories, as seen in anthropologist Webb Keane's use of ecological psychologist James Gibson's notion of affordances. See *Webb Keane*, Ethical Life. Its Natural and Social Histories, Princeton 2016.

one who, upon either reflection or crisis, sometimes finds those forms of relation to be opaque, ambiguous, disturbing, or polysemic. Or in short, this is an animal who finds that the forms of relation in which she is always already enmeshed are not self-evident as a context for moral life, but *require interpretation.* Solidarity thus offers no principle *outside* of the risks of interpreting one's social world as a field of action. The salient choice is not between, say, solidarity and selfishness, or the common good and the individual good. Rather, solidarity consists in the interpretive activity by which one comes to experience one's own membership in various commons, groups, and networks of relations (families, nation-states, social movements, friend groups, institutions, and so on) *as a problem* – and so as a site for interpreting, for cutting ties and rejoining groups, for unmaking and remaking intimacies of relation. Third, that this is in Michel's account an utterly ordinary thing offers a helpfully deflationary account of the vexed relation of intellectuals to solidarity movements, insofar as it underscores that ordinary people are *also* engaged in the conflict posed by Adorno, and that if there is difference in the felt nature of that conflict between intellectuals and others, it is not one of kind but degree. In short, if it is not the intellectual alone who continually reinterprets the moral significance of the relations in which one finds oneself, if instead it belongs to the nature of *homo interpretans* as such to move inside and outside the reference point of its group, then what results is not the resolution of solidarity as a problem, but its reframing: solidarity as an ordinary aspect of interpreting the ethical situation in which one daily lives, spends, eats, grieves, dies – that is, a reframing of solidarity as a way of life.

Yet there is one striking absence in Michel's work that forms the point of entry into the rest of this paper. As Hans Joas points out in his preface to the book, Michel "has profound and original things to say on the role of hermeneutics in medicine," in psychoanalysis, in the social sciences, in ethnography, and though he does not say much about it, "even the potential of hermeneutics…for the natural sciences." "There is only one conspicuous absence on this list: namely, theology."[11] Not only do these two underexplored disciplines as sites of *homo interpretans* – the natural sciences and theological inquiry – comprise two of the three core approaches to my work, but it is also precisely the ambiguous historical relation between them that, despite its absence in Michel, centers the question of the *inescapable* work of interpretation in how animals like us might receive a revelation of truths natural or divine. To see how and why that is the case, I turn now to the first of my interlocutors – historian of science Lorraine Daston.

2. Daston

"Theology continues to haunt epistemology," writes Daston, "feeding desires that can never be realized for a form of reason that escapes the limitations of our species." Her point is that philosophers of science – from ancient to modern – find themselves ever "enmeshed in theology, either overtly or covertly," precisely to the extent that they "yearn … for

[11] *Hans Joas*, "Preface," Homo Interpretans. Toward a Transformation of Hermeneutics, trans. by David Pellauer, London 2019, xiii–xiv.

another kind of reason, allegedly more perfect" than the specific kind we have: "human reason in human bodies."[12]

By an extended appreciative argument with Daston, my aim here is to press the hermeneutics of revelation in two new directions: first by taking Daston's claim (theology haunts epistemology) as opening a fresh vantage onto Christian hermeneutics' own locus classicus, Augustine's *De Doctrina;* second by showing how this unlikely convergence of Christian hermeneutics and modern history of science *matters* for the task of rethinking solidarity in the present amid racial modernity. I organize this argument by contending that Daston's claim above is at once *brilliant* (here, Part I) and *odd* (Part II), then I sketch its salience for rethinking the human within the world race built by a brief suggestive engagement with the notion of *homo narrans* in the work of Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter (Part 3).

In *Against Nature* Daston approaches at a slant a familiar and seemingly intractable problem: the so-called naturalistic fallacy. She begins from the incontrovertible: despite centuries of modern philosophical attempts finally to sever is from ought, to ban the authorizing of moral orders through appeals to natural orders, it remains the case that "the temptation to extract norms from nature seems to be enduring and irresistible." Daston takes no position on the 'naturalistic fallacy' debate itself. Instead, she is interested in *why* it exists at all. She is not attempting to "succeed where the likes of Hume, Kant, Mill" and others have failed. The point is "to understand *why* they have failed," that is, to explore what the ineradicable search for norms from nature might imply about *the sort of animal the human is*. Her inquiry, like mine, is philosophical anthropology. "Why do human beings in many different cultures and epochs, pervasively and persistently, look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct?" Again: "Why does the moral resonance of nature persist so stubbornly?" And she wants to move into the space cleared by this question without filling it in prematurely and easily: "I do not think the answer to this question lies just in an account of popular error, vestigial religious beliefs, or sloppy habits of thought."[13] Natural orders are invoked to authorize moral orders, Daston notes, from ancient India to medieval France to Enlightenment America, by both reactionaries and revolutionaries, by the proudly secular and the devoutly religious, including by partisans on opposite sides of the very same political or social issue. Why? Or more precisely: What sort of animals are we, such that this is the case?

Daston's previous work is relevant here. In *Objectivity,* co-authored with Peter Galison, Daston traces the historical emergence of 'judgment-free representation' as a regulative ideal in the rise of the natural sciences during the eighteenth century, in relation but not reducible to new technologies of mechanical reproduction, measurement, and image-making. "Most significant for our purposes," they write, "the machine seemed to offer images *uncontaminated by interpretation.*"[14] Objectivity has a history younger than truth, younger than certainty, they argue, and it is distinctly in the nineteenth century that this anti-interpretive strain comes fully into its own: "*To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears*

---

[12] *Lorraine Daston*, Against Nature, Cambridge 2019, 69 f.
[13] Ibid., 3–5.
[14] *Lorraine Daston*; *Peter Galison*, Objectivity, Brooklyn 2007, 139.

no trace of the knower…Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence."[15] And yet, the book's meticulous documentation of the emerging material practices and epistemic ideals of the sciences is an archive of precisely this contamination's seeping in, precisely of a failure to purge fully all traces of the perceiving subject from the object perceived: "This promise was never actually fulfilled – neither the camera obscura nor smoked-glass tracings nor the photograph could altogether rid [scientific knowledge] of interpretation."[16] Paradoxically, Daston and Galison show, because "mechanical objectivity remained an always-receding ideal, never fully obtainable," it triggered a passionate drive toward precisely an ethics of the subject, that is, toward a moral project involving a self-transformation of the scientific knower, one who through spiritual exercises emerges capable of "inhibiting desire, blocking temptation, and defending a determined effort to see without the distortions induced by […] aesthetic pleasure"– an idea pursed even, at times, at the expense of fidelity to the very nature to be depicted.[17] "When forced to choose between accuracy and moral probity, the [scientist] often chose the latter, as we have seen: better to have bad color, ragged tissue edges, limited focal planes, and blurred boundaries than even a suspicion of subjectivity."[18] It is not 'verisimilitude' to the object but the 'non-intervention' of the subject that counts.[19]

This matters because in *Against Nature*, twelve years later, Daston has returned to this node of intersecting issues while carrying a new question in hand. If there is an attempt to erase the knower's own role in the production of knowledge, *why* does it seem to fail – especially when it comes to the need for authorizing ethical life, for establishing sources of normativity and moral order?

I find Daston's argument brilliant because she has indeed shown the degree to which the modern desire to refuse the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy' (put crudely: no norms from nature) rests upon a deeper refusal of the sorts of animals we are. In *Objectivity*, she traces this through an odd habit recurring in some of the most notable philosophers and scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth century – their enduring longing for an ideal of verifiable knowledge which would not only escape the limitations of particular human subjectivity, *but the* limits *of the human species as such*.

> "Like Frege and Poincaré, Schlick defined objectivity in terms of independence from the physiological and the psychological, conceived in terms of individual variation. *This epistemological flight from a certain kind of body endowed with certain kinds of sense organs sometimes left the realm of the human altogether*. Kant had sought knowledge valid for all rational beings, even for angels. In the still-new twentieth century, Schlick began imagining bizarre, surgically created monsters for whom objective knowledge ought still to be valid…What had begun as a quest to transcend the idiosyncrasies of individual human experience as documented by the psychophysiologists had *grown into an ambition to cast off even the constraints of species*."[20]

---

[15] Ibid., 17.
[16] Ibid., 139.
[17] Ibid., 185.
[18] Ibid., 185.
[19] Cf. ibid., 187.
[20] Ibid., 296 (emphasis mine).

Following this, Daston and Galison open a striking window into turn of the century science fiction fantasies of other monstrous rational knowers, aliens, cyborgs, gelatinous Martians, brains attached to shriveled tubes.

> "In the cosmic community imagined by these writers, wholly different senses, wholly different emotions, even wholly different bodies offer no impediment to communication among intelligent beings. All one has to do is close one's eyes, to block out the distracting, distorting, disturbing images – and think of objectivity."[21]

But this ability to disconnect from the sort of body one is does not seem to hold, and especially not for the realm of moral order, which requires 'normativity,' that is, norms guiding conduct, but also a normality which can set order from chaos, expectations from shock.[22] Daston invites us to consider that we appear to need a relation between moral order and the regularity and observability – the commonness of a shared reference point – of natural orders. This seems to be in the nature of the kind of animals we are. In a crucial point from *Against Nature*, she writes:

> "Perhaps other sorts of intelligences, with different bodies and senses, or no bodies at all, would not need to figure anything. For Martians and angels, order might just be, requiring no representation. But for our species, with our sensorium, orders must be grasped and imagined, both literally and figuratively."[23]

For Martians and angels, order might require no intermediary, no representation. Even the *sine qua non* of scientific inquiry – measurement – requires this, since even the most rigorous empirical operations suffer from "bias, low precision, restricted generality, and other factors," such that "*no scale used by mortals is perfectly free of their taint.*"[24]

Mortality itself, the finitude of the human, is involved in measurement's ineluctable constraints. (I recently heard a prominent evolutionary scientist say, *perhaps if dolphins did science, we would be free of the risk of bias.*) But as long as there are humans, there seems to be no 'pure' knowledge, nor any pure way to construct and imagine moral orders independently of gesturing toward the natural orders inside which we find our lives entangled. Instead, humans are – Daston argues, following Ian Hacking – *homo depictor:* an animal with an "irrepressible urge to represent, to make the invisible visible, to render immaterial ideas concrete and tangible" through the sense perceptions of our embodied cognition.[25] In other words, the desire for pure *transparency* in knowledge, a window into nature with no intermediary task of representation, is rooted in a desire to *escape what it means to have a sensorium as we do, to be enfleshed animals in time.* It is neither Daston's purpose, nor mine, to rehearse familiar constructionist vs. realist debates about scientific knowledge, but

---

[21] Ibid., 298.
[22] *Daston*, Against Nature (see fn. 12), 59.
[23] Ibid., 59.
[24] *Stanley Smith Stephens*, "On the Theory of Scales of Measurement,", in: Science, New Series 103/2684 (1946), 680.
[25] *Daston*, Against Nature (see fn. 12), 52.

rather to press toward the implications of this aspect of human culture for the hermeneutics of revelation. And that brings me to part 3.

3. Augustine

I find Daston's claim – that theology haunts the epistemology of scientific knowledge – not only brilliant, but also a little *odd* because although she is right to link the claim to the realm of religion and theology, it is precisely the most influential figure of western Christian hermeneutics – Augustine of Hippo – who made something very close to her own claim about the nature of human knowing some sixteen centuries earlier: "All this," writes Augustine of the revelation of truth to humankind, "could certainly have been done through an angel," (or perhaps Daston's Martians), "*but the human condition would be wretched indeed if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency*."[26] In this passage from *De Doctrina Christiana* and elsewhere, the human condition for Augustine (despite his reputation to the contrary!) is decidedly *not* wretched, at least not in this way. And so it is, for Augustine, that God wills not to "broadcast direct from heaven or through angels," but "rather through a human intermediary," precisely because without this role for embodied mediation in the revelation of truth, "there would be no way for love [to] tie people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and intermingle with each other." I am struck by this notion of people tied together in bonds of unity as basal to how human animals come to *know.*

Enfleshed souls in solidarity, teaching and learning with one another: this places a social and hermeneutic task at the center of the human way of life, at once the means and the end of divine self-revelation to the created world. Against those in both the sciences and in theology who yearn for unmediated Platonic truths, for pure propositions without a subject, the Augustinian tradition yields a vision of hermeneutics which does not so much point to as it *enacts* a lived ethic of human solidarity. Revelation does not reveal solidarity. Revelation, by requiring hermeneutics as an entailment of the sort of animals we are, presupposes it. For both Daston and Augustine then, the human is *homo interpretans* – an enfleshed animal who is *fundamentally a representing and interpreting animal,* one whose distinct way of knowing offers no unmediated access to truth, no bloodless forms, Martian or angelic, but rather invites us into the work of making sense of signs and symbols, which requires inhabiting – to quote Rowan Williams on *De Doctrina* – "the world in which we actually live, the world of body, time and language, absence and desire."[27] And it is worth noting that Augustine's more famous interpretive rule – connect an interpretation with 'the realm of love' – is no romantic license, but rather, a rigorous normative criterion for what counts as a 'good reading,' one which makes sense as a hermeneutic principle precisely to

[26] *Augustine*, On Christian Teaching, trans. by R. P. H. Green, Oxford 1997, 5 (emphasis mine). (From Augustine's Preface, section 6).
[27] *Rowan Williams*, On Augustine, London 2016, 55.

the extent that it advances exactly what reading *is for:* to bind us together through the role of mediating signs, images, symbols, and the labors of interpreting them together.[28]

This interpretive frame, animating the human endeavor to know, whether under the rubric of scientific or theological ways of knowing, resonates with the emerging method of 'science-engaged theology,' which refuses a "scientistic picture of theologians waiting for scraps from the scientists' table," and instead insists that "scientific findings, no less than doctrinal expression, both presume and require interpretation." If this is the case, "the natural sciences are better conceived of as a *source* for theology alongside Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Indeed, the natural sciences might be thought of within the source of experience, albeit a type of experience that is interpreted (like Scripture), constrained by a standardized method of public enquiry (like reason), and subject to falsification and amendment (as a kind of tradition)."[29] I follow broadly in this method, while underscoring here that an anthropology of *homo interpretans* makes it possible to place scientist, theologian, and 'ordinary person' (if such a category can exist) together in the shared human situation of facing opacity, variability, polysemy, and being unable to escape the risks of interpretation to a pure realm of the self-evident. But I also hinted above that part of addressing solidarity's sickness involves troubling the very anthropological assumptions that would set 'ordinary people' apart from intellectuals, as though only the latter are engaged in the hermeneutic task. And no intellectual has gone deeper into the roots of our anthropological assumptions, the crucial role of our present descriptive statements about the human within the racial order of colonial modernity than Sylvia Wynter.

4. Wynter

Daston presents a historical window into the perennial longing of modern scientific thought to escape the task of reasoning as shaped by the particular kind of animals we are, enfleshed in time, woundable and finite, as witnessed in the history of modern yearning for monsters, angels, aliens as models of knowing – unmediated, immediate, pure. Augustine gave us a theological account of human knowing as impure, as mediated through time, sign, image, and further, provides us a tacit ethical vision: God made us this way to bind us together in solidarity. Even in the case of divine revelation, we do not get to escape our human bonds to a solely *extra-human* point of reference – a point of purity or transparency which can stabilize the risks of knowing one another, and of the time-bound process of coming to know the world through shared means, through teaching and learning. I now turn briefly to engage Black feminist philosopher Sylvia Wynter's account of *homo narrans,* an idea which, at first glance, seems merely to resonate with or even replicate *homo interpretans.* But when viewed within Wynter's overall project, we see its resonance with Daston and Augustine folded into a wider genealogical account of our global-colonial political present,

---

[28] *Augustine*, On Christian Teaching (see fn. 26), 80.
[29] *John Perry*; *Joanna Leidenhag*, "What is Science-Engaged Theology?", in: Modern Theology 37/2 (2021) 245–53, here 248.

raising the stakes of the inquiry while providing an alternate point of return to solidarity's sickness in my conclusion.

A quick word of background: Wynter's corpus defies summary.[30] Her philosophical project is as ambitious as Kant's, as opaque as Hegel's, as archaeologically ambitious as Foucault's, as densely sourced as Charles Taylor's, yet until recently it has remained largely unknown outside Black and Caribbean feminist studies. Because this project consists largely in interrogating and displacing the very terms which structure modern knowledge, it has generated a distinct lexicon of concepts – Man1 and Man2, sociogeny, autopoiesis, *propter nos,* meta-Darwinian, the science of the word – which bear technical and precise uses across her writings, but to those unfamiliar with her work, can appear cryptic, convoluted, forbidding.

For our purposes, and at risk of flattening complexity, the heart of Wynter's intervention is this: with historical, analytic, and conceptual rigor Wynter undertakes (a) a vast redescription of "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" *as* (b) interlocking dimensions of an underlying struggle "between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i. e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves,"[31] *while also* (c) proposing an alternative vision of the human, one she has articulated – and this brings her most directly into conversation with the preceding – as *homo narrans:* the human as a storytelling and interpreting species.

> "The paleontologist Juan Luis Arsuaga proposes that the human is not only a languaging being but also a storytelling species. In my own terms, the human is *homo narrans.* This means that as a species, our *hybrid* origins only emerged in the wake of what I have come to define over the last decade as the Third Event. The First and Second Events are the origin of the universe and the explosion of all forms of biological life, respectively. I identify the Third Event … as the origin of the human as a hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species: *bios/mythoi.* The Third Event is defined by the singularity of the *co-evolution* of the human brain *with* – and, unlike those of all the other primates, *with it alone* – the emergent faculties of language, storytelling. This co-evolution must be understood concomitantly with the uniquely *mythmaking* region of the human brain, as [modern neuroscientists] document."[32]

---

[30] For a point of entry, see the interview in *Sylvia Wynter*, "ProudFlesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter," in: ProudFlesh. New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness 4 (2006) 1–35. The clearest point of entry in the secondary literature to Wynter's dense, elliptical, intensely theoretical oeuvre is *Bedour Alagraa*, "*Homo Narrans* and the Science of the Word. Toward a Caribbean Radical Imagination," in: Critical Ethnic Studies 4/2 (2018) 164–181.

[31] *Sylvia Wynter*, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom. Toward the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,", in: CR. The New Centennial Review 3/3 (2003) 257–337.

[32] *Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick*, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in: Sylvia Wynter. On Being Human as Praxis, ed. by Katherine McKittrick, Durham, N.C 2015, 25.

This makes possible two crucial interventions at the level of philosophical anthropology: one anti-scientific-reductionist, the other anti-strong-social-constructionist. First, Wynter's oeuvre makes it possible to revisit the modern phenomena Daston describes – the attempt to overcome interpretation as an attempt to escape the human sort of animals we are – and grasp it as coextensive historically with the racializing of the world: that is, with the use of evolutionary discourses to make possible the historical emergence of (western) Man and his (global nonwhite) semi-human others. The point, for my purposes, is that Wynter has her finger on the critique Daston articulates (the critique of the perennial modern wish for a way of knowing severed from the kinds of animals we are), but Wynter links it to an understanding of 'race' in the New World – not as a narrow 'identity' question, but as the installment of a Manichean division into modern global humanity: between the rational-objective-transparent Man, and the sensate-subjective-opaque racialized peoples of the globe (esp. Black and Indigenous peoples), and with it the overrepresentation of Man *as if* he were the Human itself. At the heart of this history, Wynter suggests, is a biocentric conception of the human species, by which natural selection and 'dysselection' came to *naturalize* the global inequalities of a colonial system of extraction, framing them not as a self-serving European interpretation of global human difference for the sake of legitimizing a global system of domination, but rather as an objective, unmediated, extra-humanly established and scientifically descriptive account of the world. This is what race comes into being to provide:

> "Race was therefore to be, in effect, the nonsupernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the reoccupied place of the traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are."[33]

The task for Wynter then becomes producing a counter-description; it becomes to challenge the biocentric notion that what we mean when we say 'human' can be described as self-evident, extra-humanly instituted (rather than interpretive). This is (again) the *interpretans* side of *homo interpretans* – an anti-reductionist intervention against a scientistic positivism which made possible the naturalization of racial hierarchies.

Second, the notion of *homo narrans* also challenges the strong social constructionist view of an endlessly malleable creature with no underlying physiological or scientific basis. This is the *homo* side of *homo interpretans*, conceived as intervention against pure constructivism: "In the wake of our commitment to a social constructionist perspective that tends to *follow* biological categorization," Katherine McKittrick summarizes, "Wynter insists that we take seriously the workings of neurology, blood, flesh, bones, and muscles, as biological life and death are languaged into existence."[34] In short, *homo narrans* is a narrator, an interpreter, yes, but one whose interpretative mode of being does not float in the air, nor is established ontologically in the manner of Heidegger, but rather is grounded in

---

[33] *Sylvia Wynter*, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being" (see fn. 31), 264.

[34] This reading comes from one of Wynter's keenest interpreters and interlocutors, *Katherine McKittrick*, in "Axis, Bold as Love. On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," in: Wynter, On Being Human (see fn. 32), 155.

the contingencies of what it means to be *this sort of biological organism*. We must attend both to the underlying universal capacities of the human animal *and* the range of creative and interpretive responses these capacities afford, particularly those which involve *narrativizing this very capacity for interpretive acts*.[35] Wynter's *homo narrans* thus gives us a way to inhabit the borderland between not just the abstract 'particular' and 'universal,' but between the specific contingent struggles of particular groups of those excluded from the category of Man (racialized and colonized peoples, working class women, the queer, the disabled) and a universal horizon of struggle that she calls "being human as praxis" and that I would call solidarity as a way of life.

In sum, what Wynter calls the 'biocentric Darwinian' descriptive statement of the human animal is an interpretive framework for the racial division of the modern-colonial world's into the naturally dominant (Western, human) peoples of Europe and the naturally subjugated (colonized, darker-skinned Black and Indigenous) peoples of the world, but it is one which *erases its own status as an interpretive framework.* Instead it *presents itself as* "extrahuman truth determined by the immutable, objective, and necessary 'laws' and 'forms' of nature."[36] Never is *homo interpretans* more powerful than when its interpretations can pass as self-evident, as not an interpretation at all. And the key tool for achieving this under the epistemic conditions of western modernity, Wynter suggests, is the (pseudo-) Darwinian idea that we are *merely natural* creatures. Against this, Sylvia Wynter proposes an anthropology of *homo narrans*, humans as storytellers – as both *bios* and *mythos* – which resonates with even as it goes beyond the anthropologies furnished by Daston and Augustine.

5. Conclusion

My hope in bringing together this unlikely set of interlocutors is to imagine new paths forward for an anthropology of the human as a representing and interpreting animal – a vision which can unite disparate threads of reflection in the history of science, theological hermeneutics, and Black studies, in the service of a fresh angle onto the demands of solidarity in the Anthropocene crises now upon us. I think this matters in a particular way at a moment when solidarity still feels stuck, or sick – trapped and itself a kind of trap. Elsewhere in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno himself attempted a kind of therapeutic. His demands that the intellectual start from a refusal of the self-deception which aims, prematurely, to collapse a distinction between oneself and the masses with whom one would stand in solidarity. This egalitarian collapse Adorno thinks worthless: "Condescension, and thinking

[35] This again resonates with, even as it expands the significance of, a claim like Johann Michel's, who writes "it is the task of interpretive anthropology to characterize the range of self-interpretations that ordinary agents use when confronted with the issues that surround the meaning of their existence, particularly when faced with a set of discordant events, such as biographical events, which permanently affect a life that can no longer be taken for granted. Stories, in particular—as ways of embedding oneself in a narrative—can serve as valuable interpretive technologies for restoring self-continuity where the event generates disruption, dissonance, or dissolution of the self" (*Johann Michel*, 'Anthropology of Homo Interpretans' [see fn. 7], 13).

[36] *Ferreira da Silva*, "Before Man," in: Wynter, On Being Human (see fn. 32), 95.

oneself no better, are the same." It would be merely "to adapt to the weakness of the oppressed" and in turn "this perfect screening of power only allows the class-relationship it denies to triumph more implacably. For the intellectual, *inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity*."[37]

The response to this call to isolation, in the Wynterian tradition, is neither to tolerate condescension, nor to valorize "the weakness of the oppressed," but rather to interrogate the position of "weakness" itself, historicizing it as belonging to a classificatory schema of Man that we need not accept (even if Adorno despite himself did). This tradition is well aware of how easily and quickly "particular intellectual and emancipatory projects – the left, civil rights, feminism – while historically promising, have in fact failed to radically unsettle, or call in to question … Man-as-human," that is, failed to escape Man as "the origin," the pivot point for a whole schema.[38] And it is well-aware of how, even minoritized intellectuals, especially in the academy, "whether battling or embracing Man," remain "*classed* members of [the very] social system" they criticize, and so they are always at risk of "actually profit[ing] from replicating this system, rather than being co-human and existentially *with* those who are logically excluded from this knowledge system."[39] Here it is as though McKittrick, thinking with Wynter, recognizes precisely the risk Adorno thought he saw: that attempts at solidarity with the oppressed run the full risk of middle-class condescension. But whereas Adorno takes as eternal what separates the middle-class intellectual from the oppressed, McKittrick – through Wynterian tools – goes to the root cause of the separation: that the abstract 'oppressed' appear as such "because they inhabit spaces conceptually imperceptible from the point of origin," that is, *inscrutable so long as one accepts Man as the pivot point*. But if one does not, if one accepts *homo narrans* instead, the endlessly interpreting and open-ended generative praxis of being human together, then 'the oppressed' are no longer 'too alien to comprehend.' Instead, it is possible to attempt "being co-human and existentially *with*."[40] This *with-ness* is what I have in mind by a reconfigured solidarity, a solidarity made a little less sick, solidarity thrown down into the world of everyday life, and thus, a solidarity which carves out space even for revelation within ordinary knowing activities for the kinds of animals we are. This is not as abstract as it sounds. In McKittrick's case, it looks like an intellectual practice in which prominent Ivy League neuroscientists appear in footnotes alongside Nas and Jimi Hendrix, in which both academic journal articles and theatrical productions are sites of producing and contesting the human, where both the seminar room and the dance floor are sites of inquiry – both as sites to be interpreted, and sites where the interpretive task itself *takes place*. Whether sitting in seminar or moving in rhythm the human remains interpreted and interpreter, a divinely-created storytelling species, bound ineradicably together on the earth – *bios* and *mythos*, words together made flesh.

---

[37] *Adorno*, Minima Moralia (see fn. 1), 26 (emphasis mine).
[38] *McKittrick*, "Axis, Bold as Love," (see fn. 34), 152.
[39] Ibid., 153 f.
[40] Ibid., 154.

For Lorraine Daston, humans long to possess a knowledge formation that transcends the limitations of our species. After briefly introducing the wider project of which this paper forms a part – a rethinking of solidarity for the Anthropocene – I sketch a program for philosophical anthropology I call (repurposing Johann Michel) homo interpretans, the human as most basically a hermeneutic animal, by way of an extended quarrel with Daston. In doing so, my aim is to press the hermeneutics of revelation in two new directions: first by taking Daston's claim (theology haunts epistemology) as opening a fresh vantage onto Christian hermeneutics' own locus classicus, Augustine's De Doctrina; second by showing how this unlikely convergence of Christian hermeneutics and modern history of science matters for the task of rethinking solidarity in the present amid racial modernity. I organize this argument by contending that Daston's claim above is at once brilliant (Part 1) and odd (Part 2), then I turn to sketch its salience for rethinking the human within the world race built by a brief suggestive engagement with the notion of homo narrans in the work of Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter (Part 4).