

On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project

Sylvia Wynter

The idea that Western thought might be exotic if viewed from another landscape never presents itself to most Westerners.

Amiri Baraka (1963)

It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course . . . We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas . . . In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas.

Larry Neal (1971)

I would like to refer you to an essay by the late Dr. Du Bois where he . . . says that, up until the point that he really came to terms with Marx and Freud, he thought "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 had to include a little something other than an interesting appeal to "truth" in some abstract, universal sense.

Gerald McWhorter (1969)

The emergence of the Black Studies Movement in its original thrust, before its later cooption into the mainstream of the very order of knowledge whose “truth” in “some abstract universal sense” it had arisen to contest, was inseparable from the parallel emergence of the Black Aesthetic/Black Arts movements and the central reinforcing relationship that had come to exist between them. Like the latter two movements, the struggle to institute Black Studies programs and departments in mainstream academia had also owed its momentum to the eruption of the separatist “Black Power” thrust of the Civil Rights Movement. It, too, had had its precursor stage in the intellectual ferment to which the first Southern integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement had given rise, as well as in the network of extracurricular institutions that had begun to call for the establishment of a Black university, including, *inter alia*, institutions such as the National Association for African-American Research, the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, the Institute of the Black World, the New School of Afro-American Thought, the Institute of Black Studies in Los Angeles, and Forum 66 in Detroit. The struggle for what was to become the institutionalization of Black Studies was to be spearheaded, however, by a recently enlarged cadre of Black student activists at what had been, hitherto, almost purely white mainstream universities, all of whose members had been galvanized by Stokely Carmichael’s call, made in Greenwood, Mississippi, for a turning of the back on the earlier integrationist, “We shall overcome” goal of the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement, and for the adoption, instead, of the new separatist goal of Black Power.

All three movements had been moved to action by the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. and by the toll of burning inner cities and angry riots that followed in its wake. These events were particularly decisive for the Black Studies Movement. The new willingness of mainstream university administrators to accede to the student activists’ demands for the setting up of Black Studies programs and departments was made possible by the trauma that gripped the nation. Once established, these new programs and departments functioned to enable some of the major figures of the then far more powerful and dynamic Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements to carry some of their work into the academic mainstream, even where they, too, like Black Studies as a whole itself, were to find their original transgressive intentions defused, their energies rechanneled as they came to be defined (and in many cases, actively to define themselves so) in new “multicultural terms” as African-American Studies; as such, it appeared as but one of the many diverse “Ethnic Studies” that now served to re-verify the very thesis of Liberal universalism against which the challenges of all three movements had been directed in the first place.

The destinies of the three movements were, in the end, to differ sharply. The apogee years for all three movements (1961–71) were to see the publication of a wide range of anthologies of poetry, theatre, fiction, and critical writings, but also of the publication of three scriptural texts specific to each. Whereas 1968 saw the publication of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writings*, edited by Leroi Jones and Larry Neal, as *the* definitive anthology that crystallized

the theoretical discourse and practice of the Black Arts Movement, 1969, which saw the publication of *Black Fire* in a paperback version, marked the publication of the proceedings of a 1968 symposium, *Black Studies in the University*, which had been organized by the Black Student Alliance at Yale University. The conference was financed by the Yale administration. In 1971 the edited collection of essays by Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Black Aesthetic*, as the definitive text of what was to become the dominant tendency of that movement, was also published.

The paradox here, however, was that in spite of the widespread popular dynamic of the Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements, they were to disappear as if they had never been. They had been done in by several major developments. First, by the tapering off of the movement of social uprising that had been the Black Civil Rights Movement, in the context of the affirmative action programs which enabled the incorporation of the Black middle classes and socially mobile lower middle classes into the horizons of expectation, if still at a secondary level, of the generic white middle classes, ending with the separation of their integrationist goals from the still ongoing struggles of the Black lower and underclasses. At the same time, this separation had itself begun to be effected in the wider national context, both by the subsiding of radical New Left politics subsequent to the ending of the Vietnam War, as well as by the rightward swing taken by the society as a whole as a reaction against the tumultuous years of the 1960s.

Second, their demise was hastened by the defection of the most creatively original practitioner of the Black Arts Movement, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and his conversion from Black Power nationalism (of which the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements had been the “spiritual arm”), to the Maoist wing of Marxism-Leninism as a counter-universalism to the universalism of Liberalism which the Black Nationalist Movement had arisen to contest and as one which he hoped would avoid the trap of the cognitive and psycho-affective closure into which the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements seemed to have fallen.

Third, the rise of Black feminist thought and fiction, which took as one of their major targets the male and macho hegemonic aspect of the black nationalist aesthetic and its correlated Black Arts Movement, even where Black women had played as creative a role as the men, also took its toll.¹

Baraka’s Maoist-Leninist and the Black women’s feminist defection were serious blows. The *coup de grâce* to both the Black Arts and the Black Aesthetic movements, however, was to be given by the hegemonic rise of a Black (soon to be “African-American”) poststructuralist and “multicultural” literary theory and criticism spearheaded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Since it was this thrust that was to displace and replace the centrality of the Black Aesthetic Movement, redefining the latter’s Reformation call for an alternative aesthetic able to contest what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) was later to identify as the “monopoly of humanity” of our present mainstream bourgeois aesthetics, with the reformist call for an alternative

“African-American” literary canon ostensibly able to complement the Euro-American literary one and, therefore, to do for the now newly incorporated Black middle classes what the Euro-American literary canon did and continues to do for the generic, because white, and hegemonically Euro-American middle classes.

In her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetics* (1994), Madhu Dubey perceptively summarizes Gates’s critique of the two movements whose disappearance he was instrumental in effecting. While not refuting his critique – which argued, *inter alia*, that the Black aestheticians had been duped by the tropes of figuration of the “text of blackness” – Dubey nevertheless poses a fundamental question, one that gave rise both to the title and the thrust of my argument. While she first notes that both the Black Aesthetics and Black Arts movements had sought to “unfix the notion of Blackness from the traditional color symbology of the West” and to challenge the “Western equation” of blackness “with ugliness, evil, corruption, and death,” Gates’s poststructuralist critique had now come to accuse their practitioners, in Derridian terms, of putting forward a “metaphysical concept” of blackness as presence and of having, thereby, instead of displacing an essentialist notion of identity, merely installed blackness as “another transcendent signified.” This had then caused them to become entrapped by “racial essentialism,” which by its “reversal of the Western definition of blackness” had come to depend “on the absent presence of the Western framework it sets out to subvert” (ibid: 28–9). The fact that Gates’s poststructuralist activity itself depends on the “absent presence” of the very same Western framework that it was also ostensibly contesting did not detract from the success of his ongoing attacks on the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic notion of identity in terms of poststructuralism’s “critique of the humanist subject.”

However, while admitting the effectiveness of Gates’s counter-discourse in putting the seal on the demise of these two earlier movements (as well as of Black Studies in its original 1960s conception rather than in the pacified, ethnically re-christened *African-American* Studies that it has now become), Dubey then poses the following question: Why, she asks, had it been that with all its undoubted “theoretical limitations,” the Black Aesthetic “rhetoric of blackness” should have so powerfully “exerted an immense emotional and ideological influence, transforming an entire generation’s perception of its racial identity?” What had lain behind the “remarkable imaginative power” of the nationalist “will to Blackness,” “bristling with a sense of the possibility of blackness” that had characterized the range of writings from political activists like Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver, to writer-activists like Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, and Nikki Giovanni, cultural nationalists like Maulana Karenga, literary critics and theoreticians like Carolyn Gerald, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Stephen Henderson? What had been the unique dynamic that had enabled the rhetorical energy of the Black nationalist discourse so powerfully “to mobilize the sign of blackness”?

If Dubey’s question can only be answered by the making visible of what Gates terms the absent presence of the very Western framework, in whose terms *black-*

ness, like its dialectical antithesis *whiteness*, must be fitted onto a symbology of good and evil – “The white man,” Fanon writes, “is sealed in his whiteness, the black man in his blackness . . . How do we extricate ourselves?” (F. Fanon 1967b: 9–10) – and, therefore, with any attempt to unfix the sign of blackness from the sign of evil, ugliness, or negation, leading to an emancipatory explosion at the level of the black psyche, then Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s implicit proposal that Western thought (and therefore the cultural framework of this thought) needs to be exoticized, that is, viewed “from another landscape” by its Western, and indeed in our case, Westernized, bearer subjects, can provide us with the explanatory key to the answering of Dubey’s question.

In addition, recall that the Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements were themselves historically linked to a series of other earlier such movements across the range of the Black African diaspora: not only of the US’s own Harlem Renaissance Movement, but also in that of the Négritude Movement of Francophone West Africa and the Caribbean, that of the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Antillean movements of the Hispanic Caribbean, together with the still ongoing Rastafari-Reggae religiocultural movement, an invention of the endemically jobless underclass of Jamaica, which explosively flowered at the same time as the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements, musically interacting by means of the transistor radio with the “Black Power” musical-popular expressions of the US, the 1960s and 1970s as iconized in the archetypal figure of a James Brown. They were also linked synchronically to the global field of the still then ongoing global anti-colonial movements as well as to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Any attempt to “exoticize” Western thought by making visible its “framework” from “another landscape” links us, then, to a related paradox defining all three movements. This paradox was that of their initially penetrating insights gained by the very nature of a wide range of globally subordinated peoples moving out of their Western assigned places and calling into question what was, in effect, the structures of a global world system – as well as the multiple social movements of other groups internal to the West, as for example, feminists, gay activists, Native Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, students, all mounting similar challenges – insights, therefore, into the nature of that absently present framework which mandated all their/our respective subjections. All this led, for a brief hiatus, to the explosive psychic *cum* political emancipation not only of Blacks, but also of many other non-white peoples and other groups suffering from discrimination, yet on the other hand, to their ultimate failure, in the wake of their politically activist phase, to complete intellectually that emancipation.

The literary scholar Wlad Godzich (1986) perceptively identifies the nature of this paradox when he notes that although it should have been obvious at the time that the great sociopolitical upheavals of the late 1950s and 1960s, especially those grouped under the names of decolonization and liberation movements, would have had a major impact on our ways of knowledge, this recognition has not been made for two reasons. The first is due to the “imperviousness of our present disciplines, to phenomena that fall outside their predefined scope”; the second, to

“our reluctance to see a relationship so global in reach – *between the epistemology of knowledge and the liberation of people* – a relationship that we are not properly able to theorize.” This reluctance was, therefore, not an arbitrary one, as proved in the case of the Civil Rights Movement of the US. For while the earlier goals of the movement, as it began in the South, because directed against segregation and therefore couched within the terms of the universalist premises of mainstream Liberal discourse, could be supported, once the move to include the North and the West and therefore the economic apartheid issue of an institutionalized jobless and impoverished underclass, all interned in the inner-city ghettos and their prison extensions, had led in the direction of the call for Black Power, the situation had abruptly changed. Godzich suggests that an epistemological failure emerged with respect to the relation between the claim to a black particularism as over against Liberalism’s counter-universalism, on the one hand, and over against that of Marxism as a universalism, on the other. Since, in the case of the latter, because based on the primacy of the issues confronting the Western working classes postulated as the globally generic working class, this in the same way as their issue, postulated as that of the struggle of labor against capital, had also logically come to be postulated as *the* generic human issue. While given that Liberal humanism is itself based on the primacy of the issue of the Rights of Man as *the* defining premise which underlies both our present order of knowledge, as well as its correlated mainstream aesthetics, the claim to the particularism of a Black Arts and a Black Aesthetic as well as to Black Studies in its original conception – these as the correlates of the claim to Black Power, which had itself been based on a return to the earlier recognition made in the 1920s by Marcus Garvey that, in the later words of the Barbadian novelist George Lamming, “‘the Rights of Man’ cannot include the ‘Rights of the Negro’ who had been institutionalized discursively and empirically, as a different kind o’ creature to ‘Man’” (G. Lamming 1970: 297) – were to find themselves met with outright hostility on the part of mainstream intellectuals/academics and aestheticians.

The implacable dimensions of this hostility were to lead swiftly, as Godzich further notes, to a “reterritorialization,” whose goal was to reincorporate these movements, sanitized of their original heretical dynamic, into the Liberal-universalist mainstream. However, while this reincorporation was effected, in the case of Black Studies, by its reinvention as “African-American Studies,” and as such as but one “Ethnic” Studies variant among a diverse range of others, all contrasted with, at the same time as they were integrated into, the ostensible universalism of Euro-American centered mainstream scholarship, the other two movements, by the very nature of their self-definition as a black particularism which called into question the mainstream art and aesthetics together with their “monopoly of humanity,” were not amenable to such pacification and reincorporation. As a result, their rapid disappearance, their extinction even, hastened along by Gates’s neo-universalist, poststructuralist critique, logically followed. For it had been precisely their original claim, as Godzich notes, to a Black particularism over against the universalist premises of our present mainstream

aesthetics and order of knowledge – their claim, in Gerald McWhorter’s terms, to “something other than ‘truth’ in an abstract universal sense,” or, in Neal’s terms, to a post-Western aesthetics based on a new system of ideas, with these claims, linked to their insistent revalorizing of the negative-value connotations that both the mainstream order of knowledge, and the mainstream aesthetics, placed upon all peoples of Black African descent, thereby imposing upon us “an unbearable wrongness of being” – that can be identified, from hindsight, as *the* dynamic that was to exert what Dubey defines as the immense emotional influence on an entire generation’s self-conception (including the kind of intellectual self-confidence that a Gates, for example, as a member of the beneficiary generation, would now come to possess).

Nevertheless, the eventual defeat both of the Black Aesthetic and Black Arts movements as well as of Black Studies in its original conception came from the very process that had occasioned their initial triumph – that is, from their revalorization of their “racial blackness” as systemically devalorized by the logic of our present mainstream order of knowledge, its art and its aesthetic. For while this strategic inversion had functioned for a brief hiatus as a psychically emancipatory movement, by its calling in question of the systemic devalorization of our physiognomic and original ethnocultural being as a population group, its eventual failure can be seen not only in the psychic mutilation of the tragic figure of a Michael Jackson as expressed in his physically mutilated face, but also in the widespread use of plastic surgery not only by blacks, but also by a wide range of other non-white groups, as well as by white non-Nordic groups themselves.² With this latter instance providing a clue to the fact that the systemic devalorization of racial blackness was, in itself, *only* a function of another and more deeply rooted phenomenon; in effect, only the map of the real territory, the symptom of the real cause, the real issue. This is as the territory: that, for example, Eldridge Cleaver, in trying in his book of essays *Soul on Ice* (1968) to account for the almost reflex-instinctual nature of his attraction to white women as contrasted with the lukewarm response to, for him, the always already devalorized Black woman, had glimpsed; that Gwendolyn Brooks, in trying in an interview to account for the reason that successful black men also seemed instinctively to prefer lighter-skinned black women had also charted (C. Tate 1983); that over some half a century earlier, W. E. B. Du Bois, in trying to come to grips with his own double consciousness that made it difficult for him to be an American without being anti-Negro, had recognized as a new frontier with respect to the study of the still unresolved issue of what determines (indeed, what structures) the nature of human consciousness; that Larry Neal had identified in agonistic terms as “the white thing within us.” Yet, and this is *the* dilemma, all this as a territory or issue that cannot be conceptualized to exist within the terms of the *vrai* or “regime of truth” of our present order of knowledge. Any more than, as Foucault also pointed out in the case of the eighteenth-century classical episteme or order of knowledge that preceded our contemporary own, which was to displace/replace it during the nineteenth century, the conception of biological life could have been

imagined to exist within the terms of its *vrai* or “regime of truth” (M. Foucault 1980: 78; also 109–33). Nevertheless, as a territory, an issue, to whose empirical existence the particularity of the Black experience, and therefore of our necessarily conflictual and contradictory consciousness, together with the occasional emotional release from such a consciousness, attests, as definitively as a Geiger counter attests to the empirical presence of radioactive material. This, therefore, as a hitherto unknown territory, the territory of human consciousness and of the hybrid nature–culture laws by which it is structured, that was only to be identified, in the context both of the global anti-colonial struggles, as well as of the social movements internal to the West itself, by the political activist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, doing so from the ground of the particularity of the black experience. “Reacting against the constitutional tendency of the late nineteenth century,” he wrote, “Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny” (F. Fanon 1967b: 11).

Fanon’s book was published in its original French version in 1952, one year before the publication of the Watson and Crick paper cracking the DNA code specific to the genomes of all species, including the human being. This therefore helped to emphasize that, given the genetically determined narcissism that would be endemic to all living beings in their species-specific modality, the fact that a black person can experience his or her physiognomic being in anti-narcissistic and self-alienating terms (as iconized in the tragic figure of a Michael Jackson), means that human beings *cannot* be defined in purely biogenetic terms, i.e., from a purely phylogenetic *cum* ontogenetic perspective, that is, from the perspective of the purely physiological *conditions* of being human (i.e., phylogeny and ontogeny), as we are now defined to be within the terms of our present Liberal or bio-humanist order of knowledge. Indeed, as we are induced as contemporary subjects, to psycho-affectively experience ourselves to *be*, within the terms of our also bio-humanist mainstream aesthetics.

However, if, in Fanon’s terms, the prognosis for Black self-alienation is to be favorable, the human must be redefined in terms of the hybrid phylogeny-ontogeny *cum* sociogeny mode of being that it empirically is, which is comprised of descriptive statements (G. Bateson 1968) or modes of sociogeny, in effect of *genres* or *kinds* of being human, in whose always auto-instituted and origin-narratively inscribed terms, we can alone experience ourselves *as* human. Let us note here in passing that the term *genre*, meaning *kind* of human (as in the case of our present *kind* of human *Man*, which *sociogenically* defines itself, in biocentric terms, on the model of a natural organism), as the model which aprioristically underlies all our present disciplines (M. Foucault 1973), stems from the same etymological roots as the word *gender*. This, given that from our origins on the continent of Africa until today, gender role allocations mapped onto the biologically determined anatomical differences between male and female have been an

indispensable function of the instituting of our *genres* or sociogenic *kinds* of being human. This latter as a process for which our species-specific genome as uniquely defined by the co-evolution of language and the brain has bioevolutionarily pre-programmed us.

In effect, because the systematically induced nature of Black self-alienation is itself (like that correlatively of homosexual self-alienation) only a function (a map), if an indispensable one, of the enacted institutionalization of our present genre of the human, *Man* and its governing sociogenic code (the *territory*), as defined in the ethnoclass or Western bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human on the model of a natural organism (a model which enables it to over-represent its ethnic and class-specific descriptive statement of the human *as if* it were that of the human itself), then, in order to contest one's function in the enacting of this specific genre of the human, one is confronted with a dilemma. As a dilemma, therefore, that is not so much a question of the essentializing or non-essentializing of one's racial blackness as Gates argues, but rather that of the fact that one *cannot* revalorize oneself in the terms of one's racial blackness and therefore of one's biological characteristics, however inversely so, given that it is precisely the biocentric nature of the sociogenic code of our present genre of being human, which imperatively calls for the devalorization of the characteristic of blackness as well as of the Bantu-type physiognomy, in the same way as it calls, dialectically, for the over-valorization of the characteristic of whiteness and of the Indo-European physiognomy. This encoded value-difference then came to play the same role in the enactment of our now purely secular genre of the human *Man*, as that of the gendered anatomical difference between men and women had played over millennia, if in then supernaturally mandated terms, in the enactment of all the genres of being human that had been defining of traditional, stateless orders. This therefore led, in our contemporary case, to the same asymmetric disparities of power, as well as of wealth, education, of life opportunities, even of mortality rates, etc., between whites and Blacks that, as the feminist Sherry Ortner has pointed out in her essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" was defining of the relations between men and women common to all such orders (S. Ortner 1974).³

If, therefore, it is the very institutionalized production and reproduction of our present hegemonic sociogenic code, as generated from its Darwinian origin-narratively inscribed biocentric descriptive statement of the human on the model of a natural organism, which calls, as the indispensable condition of its enactment, for the systemic inducing of Black self-alienation, together with the securing of the correlated powerlessness of its African-descended population group at all levels of our contemporary global order or system-ensemble, then the explosive psychic emancipation experienced by Black peoples in the US and elsewhere – as in the case of the indigenous "black fellas" people of Australia and Melanesia, as well as among the Black peoples of the Caribbean and of the then still apartheid South Africa – can now be seen in terms which can explain both the powerful emotional influence of the three movements which arose out

of the sociopolitical Black movements of the 1960s (i.e., the Black Aesthetic, Black Arts, and Black Studies movements in their original conception), with this experience only coming to an end with their subsequent erasure and displacement. And this logically so, given that while the psychic emancipation which these movements' revalorization of the characteristics of blackness had effected had been an emancipation from the psychic dictates of our present sociogenic code or genre of being human and therefore from "the unbearable wrongness of being," of *desêtre*, which it imposes upon all black, and to a somewhat lesser degree, on all non-white-peoples, as an imperative function of its enactment as such a mode of being, this emancipation had been effected at the level of the map, rather than at the level of the territory. That is, therefore, at the level of the systemic devalorization of blackness and correlated over-valorization of whiteness, which are themselves only proximate *functions* of the overall devalorization of the human species that is indispensable to the encoding of our present hegemonic Western-bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human, of its mode of sociogeny. In other words, because the negative connotations placed upon the black population group are a function of the devalorization of the human, the systemic revalorization of Black peoples can only be fundamentally effected by means of the no less systemic revalorization of human being itself, *outside* the necessarily devalorizing terms of the biocentric descriptive statement of *Man*, over-represented as if it were by that of the human. This, therefore, as the territory of which the negative connotations imposed upon all black peoples and which serve to induce our self-alienation, as well as our related institutionalized powerlessness as a population group is a function, and as such, a map. As, correlatively, are all the other "ism" issues that spontaneously erupted in the US in the wake of the Black social liberation movement, all themselves, like the major "ism" of class also, specific maps to a single territory – that of the instituting of our present ethnoclass or Western bourgeois genre of the human.

Nevertheless, because it is this territory, that of the instituting of our present biocentric descriptive statement of the human on the model of a natural organism that is both elaborated by our present order of knowledge and its macro-discourse of Liberal humanism, as well as enacted by our present mainstream aesthetic, together with the latter's "monopoly of humanity" (P. Bourdieu 1984), with our present order of knowledge being one in whose foundational "regime of truth," objects of knowledge such as Fanon's auto-instituted modes of sociogeny or Bateson's "descriptive statements" at the level of the psyche (G. Bateson 1968), in effect, our *genres* or *kinds* of being human, cannot be imagined to exist, neither McWhorter's call for another "truth" able to secure the good life for Black and all other peoples, nor indeed, Larry Neal's call for a post-Western aesthetic, could have been incorporable, as they themselves had hoped, within the terms of our present order of knowledge and its biologically absolute conception of the human. That is, in the way in which a later reterritorialized and ethnicized "African-American Studies," as exemplarily elaborated and brilliantly put into place by Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would prove to be.

In this context, Jones/Baraka's implied call for the exoticization of Western thought, in order to make this thought itself, its presuppositions, together with, in Gates's terms, the "absent presence" of its framework, into new objects of knowledge, to be examined from the landscape or perspective of the *blues* people – and therefore from the perspective, not of the-people-as-*Volk* as in the cultural nationalist aspects of the Black Aesthetic and Black Arts movements, but, as in the *popular* aspect of these movements, of the people as the movements of people who are logically excluded, as "the waste products of all modern political practice whether capitalist or Marxist" (J. Lyotard, citing Grand 1990: 93), with their exclusion being indispensable to the reproduction of our present order – links up with Fanon's recognition that "black self-alienation" cannot be detached from the devalored conception of the human on the purely phylogenic/ontogenetic model of a natural organism, that is defining of this thought as, indeed, of its correlated aesthetics. In the case of the former, as an episteme, one whose bio-centric order of truth calls for the human to be seen as a "mere mechanism," and as such, one whose members are all ostensibly naturally deselected by Evolution until proven otherwise by his/her or that of his/her population group's success in the bourgeois order of being and of things: "The advancement of the welfare of mankind," Darwin wrote at the end of his *Descent of Man* (1981: 403), "is a most intricate problem: all ought to refrain from marriage who cannot avoid abject poverty for their children . . . As Mr. Galton has remarked, if the prudent avoid marriage, whilst the reckless marry, the inferior members of society will tend to supplant the better members of society." Against this bio-centric, eugenist thought, and the "absent presence" of its bio-evolutionary framework or conception of the human, Fanon wrote:

What are by common consent called the human sciences have their own drama. *Should one postulate a type for human reality and describe its psychic modalities only through deviations from it, or should one not rather strive unremittingly for a concrete and ever new understanding of man? . . . All these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing – and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other "animals."* . . . Having reflected on that, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism. (Fanon 1967b: 22–3)

Notes

This chapter appears here in radically shortened form as the framing of the question further elaborated in the longer version in Gordon and Gordon (2005) – eds.

With apologies to June Jordan, riffing on Milan Kundera, and to Aimé Césaire for the term *desêtre* (translated as *dysbeing* on the model of *dysgenic*).

1 See A. Baraka (1997). For some of the differing aspects of the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements in terms of their original dynamic, see the following: C. Gerald (1971); H. Fuller

- (1971); A. Gayle, Jr. (1971); M. Karenga (1971); M. De Costa (1977); L. Neal (1971: 370–8); R. Martin (1988); A. Baraka (1963); L. Jones and L. Neal (1968); W. Van Deburg (1992); C. Taylor (1988).
- 2 Recently, as China has become integrated into the Western economic system of capitalism and therefore into the absolute single criterion or standard of being and of beauty of ethno-class (Western-bourgeois) *Man*, young Chinese middle-class women – in addition to resorting to plastic surgery to change the shape of their eyes to a Western European model – are also enduring great agony in order to get their legs stretched so that they will become longer, assimilating them to the impossible ideal of paper thin, long-legged, white, Western bourgeois models.
 - 3 Ortner argued that the functioning of a code specific to human beings, that of symbolic life and death, as a code which from our origins as a language-capacitated species, was mapped onto the anatomical differences between the male and the female sex, thereby transforming the *male/female* categories into *linguistic* ones (i.e., *man/woman, wife/husband, mother/son, brother/sister*, etc.). In consequence, if we redefine the Western cultural conception of *nature/culture* into the transculturally applicable conception of the code of symbolic life and death (Fanon's modes of sociogeny), one which enacts a value-differential between, on the one hand, the purely biological life to which women give birth, represented as symbolic death, and on the other, that of symbolic (or "true") life to which the category of the men analogically and therefore symbolically "give birth," then Ortner's conception can be seen as a member of the universal class. What, therefore, were and are the central functions of this code? Given the imperative function of each such code in the instituting and reproduction of human societal orders, the connoted value differential between (in traditional orders) the category of women and biological life, on the one hand, and that of the men and symbolic life on the other, would have to be systematically produced and reproduced. This, in parallel to the way in which, in our contemporary order, the code of ethnoclass *Man* has been mapped onto the physiognomic and skin-color difference between peoples of Black African descent, on the one hand (as the ostensible embodiment of symbolic *death* defined as that of barely evolved, biological life) and, on the other, the peoples of Indo-European descent (as the ostensible embodiment of fully evolved and thereby symbolic life). Hence the way in which the positive/negative value connotations *cum* differential between "whites" and "non-whites," and most totally, between "whites" and "blacks," must be rigorously maintained in our present order of being and of things, as the condition of the instituting of our ethnoclass, or Western bourgeois conception of the human *Man*, over-represented as if it were the human; as, in Lewis Gordon's term, *Absolute Being* (L. Gordon: 2002c).