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PRIMITIVE AT THE PLANTATION'S EDGE

by Robert F. Reid-Pharr

The *Studia* must be reinvented as a higher order of human knowledge, able to provide an "outer view" which takes the human rather than any one of its variations as Subject . . . to attain to the position of an external observer, at once inside/outside the figural domain of our order.

—*Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism"*

As a result of rallies we got courses in "black literature" and "black history" and a special black adviser for black students and a black cultural center, a rotting white washed house on the nether edge of campus.

—*David Bradley, "Black and American, 1982"*

There comes a time when the only thing that one can do is admit defeat. Standing at the tail end of a Black Studies movement established as part of the articulation of anti-segregationist, anti-colonialist African and African American political and cultural insurgencies, one is made painfully aware of a sort of necessary and inevitable social and professional marginalization structuring the everyday existence of the so-called black scholar. The broadly imagined ethical outlines of even the most valued projects of black intellectualism continue as ornamental, overly moralistic, never quite fully valid aspects of the industry / government / education complex that we decorously name the American University. Accommodated in ever more brightly colored, if distantly placed and institutionally vulnerable, houses, the Black, African, Africana scholastic project has only the most limited means by which it might affect a sort of inchoate articulation. When times are good and the funding secure the history, thought, and culture of the peoples of the African Diaspora might be taken as a sort of reiteration of the central conceits of American and European cultural and intellectual orthodoxy. A single red/brown/yellow/blue face appearing intermittently in recruitment brochures or faculty lounges boastfully reminds us of the meritocratic liberalism that presumably underwrites the basic structures of our most cherished educational and intellectual institutions. More impressive still, the scholar of Black Studies might make great use of an apparently never too tired for service "plus one" account of black subjectivity in which the most traditional ideas of universalism, cosmopolitanism, and western modernity are presumably broadened and deepened through the indication that some representative black individual "was there." And when times are lean and narratives of scarcity rub harshly against notions of open-minded largesse

one might enact again and yet again a sort of hysterically ineffectual theatrical rebellion, identifying the many always easy to uncover moments of racist hostility and insensitivity that are among the most profoundly resilient aspects of American and European society.

Still, regardless of the modes of attack and address, only the most limited consideration of Africa and the African Diaspora can be discerned within the best supported and most cherished precincts of the human sciences. There is so little awareness of the broad ideological structures on which the various practices of professional humanists are established that it becomes difficult to imagine that we might either critique or redirect basic modes of research and study. Broach the topic of lists, fields, and curricula with the most generous of colleagues and you will very likely be met with a handwringing and apologetic, if firmly conventional, story of limited resources, fixed traditions, bureaucratic obstacles, and the rigid expectations of a harshly disciplining market. At the moment of challenge, humanistic studies are imagined to exist not so much as a complex of ideologies, discourses, and institutions with an identifiable and relatively short history, but instead as an impossibly distant force, almost metaphysical in nature, that we are able to approach with only the most unstable of intellectual prosthetics.

The crisis of the humanities is first and foremost a failure of the political and ethical imaginaries that stabilize the labor that one presumably does as a practitioner of the human sciences. It is the ever more vertiginous social reality confronting intellectuals who approach their work through a sort of willed ignorance of the ideological organization of the *Studia*. The philosophical and ethical arrangements of the human sciences become much clearer once one appropriates the historical understandings given us by Michel Foucault and amplified by Sylvia Wynter, once we recognize that not only are the conceptual and instrumental arrangements that we use to teach, research, write, and publish decidedly new phenomena, but also that they are inextricably tied up with the violent extraction of value and labor.¹ In a sense then we are lucky in the United States to have so little opportunity to cover over the absolutely intimate relationship between universities, colonization, and enslavement. Step onto the campus of one of the country's great sites of learning and you are quite likely stepping onto a plantation, an institution in which the expression of so-called high culture was—and is—fueled by the literal entrapment and internment of Africans and their descendants.² Those gates and guards through and by which we pass are not simple adornments, but instead absolutely necessary safeguards within a set of protocols designed to distinguish (African) order from (European) chaos. The disciplinary structures most commonly associated with the humanities operate first and foremost to yoke the “free-floating” energy of the untidy (Negro) to a process by which a disembodied universalist (white) Order might be named. The trick of course is to accomplish this particular procedure without seeming to do so. There is good reason that there has been so little discussion of the relationship between the history of Atlantic slavery and the development of the disciplines. That procedure would invite consideration of the rather uncanny overlap of these institutions' developmental timelines, coming to maturity as they did in the twentieth century and presumably fracturing in the twenty-first. Even more to the point, a truly historicist and anti-white supremacist examination of the history of humanism and the human sciences would necessarily have to take into account not only the fact that the descendants of the enslaved and the colonized continue to do the unseen, unwanted, irrational work of the university—dumping trash cans, cleaning toilets, and

preparing meals—but also that the scholars whom they service incessantly, even manically, reiterate a set of intellectual protocols built precisely on never noting that their cleverness and disinterestedness are often themselves examples of brittle misunderstanding(s) of the conditions of their own labor.

It comes as no surprise then that Black Studies should be so often and so studiously ignored as it stands mocking and mocked at the plantation’s edge. Fascinating in its vulgarity and decrepitude, the rotting whitewashed house seems to point in two directions at once, naming a desiccated past while demanding a certain horrified attention in the present. Wynter writes:

It is within the same governing laws of figuration and its internal logic that the Black Culture Center was proscribed to exist on the nether edge of the campus. It functioned as the target stimuli of aversion, with respect to the Euroamerican order of the center of the campus, which is then enabled to function as the object stimuli of desire. The relation, functioning dually at empirical and valorizing levels, if stably kept in phase, ensures the stable production of the same shared endogenous waveshapes, in Black students as well as Whites—the same normative seeing / valuing, avoiding / devaluing behaviors. Hence the paradox that, after the turbulence of the 1960s and the 1970s the Black Culture Centers in their nether-edge-of-the-campus place function to enable the recycling (in cultural rather than racial terms) of the Order / Chaos dynamics of the system-ensemble. (“The Ceremony” 47)

Here I take some solace in the conditional nature of Wynter’s most damning observation. *If* the fraught relations between Black Studies and the “the Euroamerican order of the center” are stably kept in phase then we condemn ourselves to the reiteration of those normative behaviors and modes of thought established in the crucibles of enslavement and colonization. The very presence of the shabby house at the edge of campus remarks the possibility of rupture within these systems. It suggests modes of knowledge and articulation that if not elegant are at least not so wholly and innocently disconnected from the means of their own replication as to exist in a sort of creative stasis, operating like the disciplined, defeated professor of literature whose tepid passions never quite reach the level of either offence—or brilliance.

While I knowingly, even lovingly, embrace the disorder that is Black Studies, I cannot bring myself to celebrate that embrace. Sitting here on the ugly side of campus, collecting my thoughts in rooms that though not obviously rotting are nonetheless likely to be swept away come the next great wind, I know that my efforts must be read as at once marginal and suspect. I “have every interest in challenging an order of figuration” that programs my own negation (Wynter, “The Ceremony” 49). Yet mine is not a blameless opposition. I do not naively celebrate the obvious fraying of the humanities project. Nor do I yearn for an easy reorganization of priorities, the moving of the white house to the center. Instead I am seeking, however haltingly, for the reinvention of the *Studia* in a manner that would allow for the articulation of a fully universal humanism and the dismantling of the deeply imbedded white supremacy that so firmly establishes American and European intellectualism. In doing so, however, I must by necessity recognize the Black Studies apparatus

itself as having been established within the Order/Chaos ideological nexus that lies at the heart of the human sciences. Thus in the necessarily radical practices of disarticulation that one hopes will soon and very soon take up our attention and our energies, it is quite unclear if the rotting house will survive.

NOTES

1. See Foucault; Wynter, "On How We Mistook."
2. The deep connections between especially the most elite American universities and slavery is becoming ever more clear. Brown University, the College of William and Mary, Harvard University, Emory University, the University of Maryland, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Virginia, Yale University, and Columbia University among many others either held slaves directly, utilized slave labor in the building of their campuses, traded slaves as commodities, greatly supported the work of slavery apologists (and later apologists for colonization and segregation), or more likely some rich combination of all these things. The main campus of Johns Hopkins University is built on the former Homewood Plantation. Tours through the still standing main house are a regular part of campus life. For more on this matter see Wilder.

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