

A BLACK STUDIES MANIFESTO¹

The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness. We shall seek to ascertain the directions of this dual narcissism and the motivations that inspire it. . . . Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century 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. Besides ontogeny and phylogeny stands sociogeny.

[Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967]

One of the many problems with research on genetics, intelligence and race is that investigators often assume, because there is no scientific way to quantify the effects, that *cultural messages* about Black inferiority have no impact on Black intellectual development, *but what if they do*.

[Ellis Cose commenting on the recent book, *The Bell Curve*, by R. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, in *Newsweek*, October 24, 1994]²

If the misery of the poor be due *not* to the laws of nature but to our institutions, then great is our sin.

[Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*]

Against the *Biocentric* belief system of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*,³ or the Multicultural Canonists (Henry Louis Gates' *Loose Canon* ⁴). Against the Western superstition of Richard Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*. Therefore, against the "ground" of our present order of knowledge in which this belief system is narratively articulated on the basis of the premise that the human is a natural organism or a purely genetic being.

¹This manifesto was originally presented for the *Critical Perspectives Forum on the Culture Wars* at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York on October 20, 1994.

²See *Newsweek* cover. The implication: the O. J. *lookalike* suggests that O. J. killed his wife because of his innate criminality and defective IQ.

³See Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

⁴See H. L. Gates. *The Loose Canons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

HYPOTHESES TOWARDS A CULTURE-SYSTEMIC COUNTER-MODEL

A.

That our present order of knowledge and the *cultural messages* which its social knowledge disciplines (of the Humanities and Social Sciences) convey, the signaling systems by means of which our behaviors as contemporary Westernized and bourgeoisified humans (i.e., as *Man*), are lawlikeness elaborated according to rules of which we have been hitherto non-conscious, of which our present order of knowledge can give us no knowledge.

B.

That all human modes of consciousness (and therefore desire, preferences, choices), while implemented by the neurobiological (and the biochemical) processes of the brain, are not themselves a property of matter [Jonathan Miller, 1992]. That consciousness itself is rather a property of the *correlation* of the Origin Narratives instituting of our human forms of life and therefore of the governing codes of symbolic *life* and *death*, in whose terms we are always already socialized as specific modes of the subject, *with* the opiate (i.e., biochemical) reward and punishment system of the brain [Avram Goldstein, 1994].⁵ That therefore, all modes of consciousness by

⁵Goldstein writes in his *Addiction from Biology to Drug Policy*:

In summary, a natural opioid system exists for signaling both reward (probably by beta-endorphin) and punishment (by dynorphins). Thus, the balance of these opposing opioid peptides may regulate many aspects of our normal state of mind. We can speculate that the reward systems drive adaptive behavior the following way. They signal

means of whose "vernacular language of belief and desire" we can alone experience ourselves as human (as specific modes of the "I", of the "We"), function centrally to motivate our human behaviors. But that they have done so hitherto, and non-consciously on our parts, in the *prescriptive* terms by means of which it itself is structured as the *culture-specific* "inner eyes" [Ralph Ellison, 1952]⁶ and "mind's eye" through which alone we can see and know the social reality of which we are always already socialized (i.e., Fanon's sociogenetic) subjects.

C.

That our behaviors are therefore lawlikeness regulated by the culture-specific forms of the narratively instituted governing codes—including our present code of Western bourgeois *Man*, as the evolved selected Self and its *Other*, the non-evolved dysselected *Nigger*,⁷ with the latter being made to

"good" when food is found and eaten by a hungry animal, when water is found and drunk by a thirsty animal, when sexual activity is promised and consummated, when a threatening situation is averted. They signal "bad" when harmful behavior is engaged in or when pain is experienced. These signals become associated with the situations in which they are generated, and they are remembered. Thus, the conditioning observed in CPP procedure seems to represent the necessary process by which an animal learns to seek what is beneficial and avoid what is harmful.

. . . This delicately regulated system was perfected by evolution over millions of years to serve the survival of all species, and to let us humans experience pleasure and satisfaction from the [narratively prescribed] biologically appropriate behaviors and situations of daily life.

⁶See Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

⁷As West noted in his 1993 text, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*:

[W]hat is needed [is] to . . . explain the historically specific ways in which "whiteness" is a politically constructed category parasitic on "blackness," and thereby to conceive of the profoundly hybrid character of what we mean by "race," "ethnicity" and "nationality." For instance, European immigrants arrived on America's shores perceiving themselves as "Irish," "Sicilian," "Lithuanian," and so on. They had to learn that they were "white" principally by adopting an

function as the signifier of the symbolic *death* to our present conception of the human being, *Man*, in the same way as the Laity of the feudal order were made to function as the signifier of symbolic *death* to the symbolic *life* embodied in the voluntarily celibate category of the Clergy.

D.

That against the *acultural* belief system and supracultural fallacy of our present order of knowledge, that the human is a purely natural organism who pre-exists culture—and who can therefore be valued and socially stratified according to degrees of genetic value as ostensibly signified by the aesthetic value of its literary production (Bloom's Western bourgeois canon) or its alleged IQ (*The Bell Curve*), a Black Studies hypothesis redefines the human in the following terms:

That although *being human* is implemented by the physiological processes of the body—how else?—being human is not itself a property of these processes. Rather, being human, including our model of being human, *Man*, in its present Western bourgeois or ethno-class conception, is a property of the narratively instituted governing codes of symbolic *life* and *death* or *sociogenetic principle* enacting of our human forms of life as a third level of hybridly *bios* and *logos* existence. *Being human* can therefore not pre-exist the cultural systems and institutional mechanisms, including the institution of knowledge, by means of which we are socialized *to be* human.

That the elaboration and the guardianship of these governing codes and of their founding narratives are carried out, in all human orders, by the

American discourse of positively valued whiteness and negatively charged blackness.

grammarians or *intellectuals* of each order—from the diviners of Africa, the shamans of Mesoamerica, the priest-scholars of ancient Egypt, the philosophers of Greece, the theologians of the feudal Clergy, to *ourselves*, the academicians of our present Western bourgeois epistemological order.

That therefore, both the "misery of the poor," and of the homeless in general, the ongoing degradation of the lives of people in the inner cities, their everyday dying in the streets, as well as the ongoing degradation of the planetary environment, are only possible because of the lawlikely motivated ensemble of our collective behaviors that are made to seem just and legitimate by our present order of knowledge: by the sense of right and reasons of the economic and the aesthetic that we ourselves elaborate. (So much for our canons, literary and economic!) That our continued complicity with this order of knowledge entails our continued complicity with its *truths of power*—whether in its mainstream form or in the now proposed "multicultural" sub-variants.

E.

That as Black educator Carter G. Woodson proposed in 1933, it is precisely this body of knowledge and its *negatively marked* representations of the Black (Africa, Africans, and all things pertaining to) as the signifier of symbolic *death* and as the *fallen gene* analog of the *fallen flesh* of the medieval Laity, and *positively marked* representations of the White (Europe, and all things European) as the signifier of symbolic *life* (and analog of the redeemed Clergy), which now function to secure the stable differential of test performances between Black/White groups. And by extrapolation, between

the middle and non-middle classes, between men and women, between the bearers of the canon, in all its forms, and the non-canonized.

That this is so because in all human cultures, narratively instituted positive/negative representations are made to function as behavior-regulating signaling systems which trigger the reward and punishment, biochemical mechanism of the brain, as recently analyzed by Avram Goldstein, and which function, as Woodson pointed out, to motivate and demotivate some groups at the expense of others, as a function of the overall social stratification of each order.

That the following test results should, therefore, correlate precisely with the varying *degrees of negative* marking to which each non-White group is subjected, and to the superiority/inferiority ranking rule structuring of our global social order, and lawlikely regulated by the Color Line, as totemized in the binary opposition between White (symbolic *life*) and Black (symbolic *death*).

ACT SCORES, 1990 [National Average Composite Score was 20.6]
 "Minority" Group Students

Black	Black Americans	17.0
Red	American Indian	18.0
	Alaskan Native Students	
Latino	Mexican American	18.3
	Puerto Rican	19.3
	Other Hispanic Students	
Asian American		21.7
	Pacific Islander	

F.

That our present disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences must therefore guard and elaborate the truths of power structuring of our present order as the condition of its stable replication as such an order; that as a result, the fact that Black Americans were not included in the canon of *American Fiction* before the Sixties, as David Bradley pointed out in 1982,⁸ was a lawlike non-inclusion whose function was to positively mark the White American as the *real* American, and the *normal* human, and the Black as the Lack, or symbolic *death*, of the *real* American, of the *normal* human. Therefore any attempt to claim a canon of our own, or a "multicultural" paradigm, whilst it will incorporate the Black middle-class with the White middle-class (even if as a secondary middle-class), also serves to shift the weight of negative marking from the Black American population group *as a whole* to the population group of the inner city jobless—whether the now criminalized Black male or the now stigmatized "welfare Mom." To define our liberation in terms of a canon or the multiculturalization of knowledge therefore simply serves to continue our ongoing destruction as a population group. "It's the Black ones that are dying," as Sistah Souljah pointed out.

⁸ Bradley wrote in his 1982 essay, "Black and American,"

As a result of rallies, we got courses in "Black literature" and "Black History" and a special Black advisor for Black students and a Black cultural center...a rotting white-washed house on the nether edge of campus . . . reachable . . . by way of a scramble up a muddy bank...And all those new course did was exempt the departments from the unsettling necessity of altering existing ones, so they could go right on advertising a course in "American Fiction" that explicitly includes Hawthorne, Clemens, James, Wharton, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and implicitly excludes Chesnut, Hurston, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

Their death is the "price of our ticket," our canon, of our treason as intellectuals.

To conclude. We cannot as a population group of African descent, wholly or partly, expect any other result but our continued degradation and global disempowerment, within the terms of our present conception of the human, *Man*, and the order of knowledge by means of which this conception is elaborated. As the Other to this conception of the human, the *cultural messages* of the order of knowledge which elaborates this conception must by necessity be hostile not only to our realization, but to our survival as a population group. It is *it* or *us*.

If, on the basis of the data of the reflex aversion felt by his Black patients for their (negatively marked) physiognomy, Fanon called for a sociodiagnostic able to decipher Cose's *cultural messages* as the only royal route to knowledge of our human behaviors, and of the rules that govern them, hitherto outside our conscious awareness, Heinz Pagels, in his 1987 book *The Dreams of Reason: The Computer and the Rise of the Science of Complexity*,⁹ called for the breaching of the barrier between the natural sciences and the humanities, (specifically called social sciences and literary studies), in order to put our narratively constructed orders of consciousness

⁹ Pagels wrote in his 1988 book *The Dreams of Reason: The Computer and the Rise of the Science of Complexity*:

When we come to grasp the management of complexity, the rich structures of symbols, and perhaps consciousness itself, it is clear that the traditional barriers —barriers erected on both sides —between the natural sciences and the humanities cannot forever be maintained. The narrative order of culturally constructed worlds, the order of human feelings and beliefs, will become subject to scientific description in a new way. Just as it did during the Italian Renaissance, a new image of humanity will emerge in the future as science and art interact in their complementary spheres.

and belief under scientific description in a new way. In the terms therefore, of a new culture-scientific order of truth, able to complete the only partial victory of the natural sciences; able therefore to "unspeak Man" within the terms of a planetary and therefore, scientific (rather than our present *Liberal*) humanism as the basis of a new *studia humanitatis* —one for which the *human*, rather than *Man* in its Western bourgeois and therefore "ethnic" conception, is the referent. To move beyond the Western episteme—canons, "bell curves" and all—that is our war now.

Sylvia Wynter

"The crisis of Black and White is also a crisis in social theory."
—Harold Cruse, 1968

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