

The Economy of the Eve: An Ethical Aporia **Shannon Winnubst**

The seminar asks us to consider this question: What is or could be critical ethicality *after* humanism in its Eurocentric tradition? The *after* referenced here seems premature, if not presumptuous. While we may be in the twilight hours, there does not seem to be an “economy of the eve,” as Derrida queries in his closing lines of “The Ends of Man.” It seems to me, rather, that “we”—we who inhabit the overdeveloped lives and subjectivities of Wynter’s “Man2”—must do all we can to bring this “eve” into existenc: the death of man, the era of posthumanism, or perhaps white suicide—it goes by many names. It is towards that eve of destruction that I write.

a snapshot

Globalization, framed broadly as the endlessly kinetic circulation of labor, capital, and bodies, continues to alter, warp, and unmoor the normative concepts of time and space that have dominated cultures of classical and late liberalism. Whether the telecommunicative speed of screen-life or the implausible slowness of bodies trying to walk, swim and/or boat across national boundaries, the economics of temporality fracture any semblance of a singular interpellative Clock (such as, say, the 17th century one the British immediately erected in villages across India). Temporalities multiply and stratify, displaying various dispositions of scorn, disregard, and everlasting hope regarding the Future.¹ Spatialities also splinter and diffract: proximity becomes the index of high finance’s pleasures-already-satiated-upon-desired, while distance becomes the cruel metric of migrants and refugees suspended between “home” and “destination,” exposing the perversity of such a telic spatiality. Globalized neoliberalism (or late liberalism) intensifies the many meanings that Derrida gives to proximity—proper, propriety, property—as the logics of dispossession grow more and more widespread: fewer and fewer master proximity to transform it into propriety and property; more and more speak as capital, not of it. Finally, layered into all of this is the space-time of the Anthropocene, the imminent and oblique killing of the planet as human-animals have known it. With this register, “knowing” itself comes to the fore as a site of failure: humans—that is, Derrida’s “man” and Wynter’s “Man2”—have no epistemology for the spatio-temporal scale of geological death.

This is all too dense, too much. A jarring, messy excess that incites neither violence nor erotics. It is just, simply, too much. Such are the demands of ethical critique in these times of constant death and constantly disavowed killing.

How to kill the unwanted?

¹ I am interested in how these economics of temporalities can open onto “the expansion of the present” that Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls for in *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Paradigm: 2014).

Reading Derrida in 2017 bears little resemblance to reading him in 1991 or 1992, at least as I recall my first encounters. The inside/outside, however tenuously drawn and delicately deconstructed, no longer holds materially and affectively: the geo-economics of globalization destroyed it, undercutting any romantic or liberatory understanding of the death of man. What was far is near, perhaps all too near. The outside—the other, as we might also call it—is all too proximate. The logic that ties proximity to the proper, propriety and property cannot explain this kind of proximity—a proximity of the outside, the other, perhaps the different.

If we read Sylvia Wynter alongside scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, we find that this proximity of the other, especially the other-as-outside, has always already been too close—too close for comfort and too close to know. Wynter calls this proximity, to gloss her literally breath-taking prose, the opacity of our autopoiesis that generates the neurochemical bonding of the eusocial ‘we’ through the symbolic life/death scripts. This “we” parades about as a transcendently deduced entity, whether casting the agency of its production upon God or Nature or, finally, Race. For Wynter, the opacity of this autopoiesis provides the condition of its possibility—and, as it follows a bit too easily, the condition of its undoing. Her Nietzschean tale of coloniality ends a bit too neatly, calling for an exposure of the opacity of this autopoiesis as sufficient to undo it—calling, that is, for a hermeneutics of unveiling and disclosure as a site of liberation. But is this not the quintessential language of Man2?

For Spillers and especially Hartman, the opacity of this proximity is not to be exposed and thereby overcome. To the contrary, the opacity of this proximity that is always already interior to man/Man2 is to be muddied and thickened into the sticky intractable mess of deep psycho-historical knots that it has always been. The opacity, something like a shield, can become a site of fugitivity, as so much of contemporary black feminist theorizing is exploring.² The opacity provides refuge—and the possibility of another way of knowing, of speaking, of feeling (of autopoetically engendering a ‘we’ that neurochemically fires differently). This rendering of the opacity as protective, rather than problematic, springs from a different reading—a different naming and a different conceptualizing—of the proximity. The proximity is not (“merely,” one is tempted to say) the impossible dance of the individualizing cogito and its transcendental deduction through the disavowal of the other’s constitutive foundation. The proximity is not (again, “merely?”) an historical slippage that the individual might eventually find a way to appease sociologically. Rather, again the texts of Spillers and Hartman, as well as work such as that of the Derridean Afropessimist Nahum Chandler, name this foundational proximity precisely: “blackness.” And in so doing, they render the colonial act of violence ontological. This is what is opaque: the ontology of the colonial violence that always already positions blackness as inside and interior—as proximate—to the colonial episteme, extended globally. Not an historico-sociological aberrance, the proximity of blackness as the index of this founding violence cannot be redeemed. It is not, never was,

² I have in mind writers such as Rizvana Bradley, Christina Sharpe, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

nor ever will be the determinate negation of any *Aufhebung* (no matter the economic, sociological, legal or psychological garb it might don).

the psychic economy of the eve: fatigue

In "The Ceremony Found," Wynter intensifies this ontologizing of colonial violence by bringing forward the "global problematique," as she puts it, of extinction in the anthropocene. While sociological accounts—and the politics they spawn—divide this proximity of extinction from the proximity of blackness, Wynter demonstrates the impossibility of unraveling this knot. She demonstrates the problem, as she so often does, quite thoroughly. But, again, as she turns to the spawning of "new" symbolic life/death scripts that might remedy this doubled proximity, the hermeneutics of unveiling and disclosure foreshorten her attention. They particularly foreshorten her attention to the role of affective responses in spawning these "new" symbolic life/death scripts. How might "we"—we who are neurochemically habituated to repeat the epistemologies of Man2—become motivated to do otherwise? Why would the cognitive recognition of the opacity of our autopoeisis, when paired to the imminent extinction of the anthropocene, be sufficient to rip through the closed affective economy of Man2, with its sentimentality of guilt and fear? Why or how would this hermeneutic disclosure cathect us to the desire to uproot and destroy these rewarding, deeply eusocial life/death scripts?

By naming the proximity of the founding colonial act of violence "blackness" and reframing the opacity as a shield, black feminist theorists are carving ways of knowing, speaking, living, and feeling that do not track back into the totalizing ruts of Man2. The ways are not, however, open to all. The rendering of racialization in an ontological register for Man2 puts Derrida's closing call to a Nietzschean plurality of styles under question. The "strategic bet," with its false exits and willful breaks, is not a shift from Man2's grasp. But the pluralizing of styles also carries and comes with its significant racializations: the deeply embedded neurochemical habits of a 500 year old symbolic death scripted upon one's subject position, however literal or abstracted, is not rooted out easily or swiftly.

If we follow the pluralizing of styles as a route into, out of, away from, through, and obliquely beside the opacity of the proximity of blackness, then these styles and routes themselves become the indices of racialization. In this vein, while the reframing of the opacity as a shield offering fugitivity may be an index of contemporary black cultures, it is not one that Man2—or what we must racialized explicitly in these vertiginous neoliberal times as *whiteness*—can simply enter. In terms that become all too fraught as traps beckoning Derridean deconstruction: what is a white person, what is Man2, to do to initiate its own destruction?

The epistemology of this quandary, perhaps unsurprisingly, is simpler than the affective economy that it might presuppose. The epistemology of Man2's self-destruction marks out whiteness as eating its own tail, taking all in its wake with it. The epistemology marks clear exits: non-linear temporalities, economies of abundance and not scarcity, spatialities of

porous contiguities and not clear and distinct separations. But these remain abstracted analyses of the problematic. However trained on the material and affective registers, they do not matter.

The obstacle—especially but perhaps not only for Man2, for whiteness—may be in calling for change at all. There is no way to know. For now, it seems those of us habituated into the subject positions of white Man2, are caught in the epistemological. It seems all we can do is persistently point out the constitutive opacity of colonial violence for the power of western living. Something like an epistemological eternal return of the same, it is fatiguing and dreadfully abstract. The relentless repetition feels like the death drive. Perhaps it will initiate an economy of the eve, the eve of Man2's destruction.

No way of knowing.