

## **Ethics of Critique – “After Humanism, What?”**

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### *Ethics of Critique*

Critical thinking, the quest for critical worldly engagements, and therefore also the question of an ‘ethics of critique’ that this year’s *Terra Critica* workshop focuses on does once more bring me to stating the following: critical thinking is a transformative move or it is nothing at all. Thus, any ethics of critique cannot but be about such critical transformative powers and relies on an engagement with the world that allows, or even more so, that strives for change to happen. I cannot see an ethics of critique otherwise: it cannot but speak the *ethos* of pushing boundaries, of unworking that which appears as ‘fixed’, and of aiming ‘to make a difference’. Yet, of course, here then also lies the trap in which any ethics, but most certainly an ethics of critique might (or will?) also always fall: the unavoidable slippage into a seemingly ‘knowing better’, i.e. of assuming a critical position, and the stubborn incapacity of stepping down from a vision how the world could be otherwise; imagining things differently into a future, the necessity to ‘imagine otherwise’. Such movement of thought and/as practicing (in) this world can then not fully avoid the ethico-onto-epistemological dangers of progressivism, optimism, and over-generalizing truth claims.

How then to go about in this position paper in which I want to again affirm the strength or this ‘capital of critique’, and yet cannot accept these common critical results: progressivism, universalizing truth claims and a misplaced optimism? How to even start when what will be done here is only again proving that critical thinking indeed cannot get ‘outside (of) itself’? And how in this situation then also keep the belief in or – dare I say it – the hope for transformation, most of all transformation on the level of critique itself, as structural transformation, so that also a different ethics of critique, different from the simple progressivist ‘better’, might become manifest? Yet, by arriving at these questions I also see a first connection to Wynter’s ‘The Ceremony Found’; to something which I see as a strong characteristic of her work in general (from what I know of it up to here). For, these questions of and demands for transformation give direction also to her texts: the recurrent Fanonian ‘How do we extricate ourselves?’ (CF 195) and ‘What is to be done is to set man free?’ (CF 192, 245) are in as much her critical guides as is her unwavering belief in the possible manifestation of Césaire’s ‘humanism to the measure of the world’ (Césaire 1955, Wynter 1984, 2003) that leads also into her “heretical” demand to a radical ‘rewriting of knowledge’ (Wynter 1994). And yet, how can she make these claims so strongly, if on the other hand from the systems-theoretical perspective that she brings to the fore and the long *durée* approach in which she is so deeply invested, it is rather questionable that a ‘getting outside (of) itself’ is ever possible? To make the issue still more graspable, and bring into conversation Derrida at this moment, too: how does it work that the latter’s deconstructive/-ed ‘ends of man’ become again an agential *telos* in Wynter (CF 245) without, however, this is my firm belief after reading Wynter’s texts, her falling into the very same ‘over-representation of man’ as monohumanist genre of being human that she sees also already Derrida addressing as *the* problem of and for philosophy<sup>1</sup> in 1968? Are

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, a great over-generalization to refer here to ‘philosophy’ without further specification: Derrida reads Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger in *The Ends of Man*; i.e. the continental phenomenological tradition of philosophy.

these now the transformative powers of a critical thinking that instigates also a possible transformative ethics of critique, or is what we encounter here simply a contradiction in terms? To put the issue at stake yet in other words, and thereby connecting what I wrote up to here also to another question that this workshop pursues: What does 'The Ceremony Found' (and with it 'The Ends of Man') actually do in the ethico-onto-epistemological sense of critical transformative work, so that both can be read as critical engagements *after* humanism?<sup>2</sup>

*'After Humanism': Squaring the Circle*

What matters here is approaching the question after the critical transformative powers of the *after* of 'after humanism' in such a way that it doesn't directly fall into either the trap of progressivism (linear time) or a 'bettering' vision (teleology), which keeps everybody and everything in the familiar critical comfort zone of dominant development-oriented humanisms, with their always already presupposed knowledge of who-we-are. As can easily be seen here, the question that I'm after in my paper does not differ so very much from the one Derrida was after in 1968 and also not from what Wynter brings to the discussion in her earlier 'The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism' (Wynter 1984). Yet, rereading 'The Ends of Man' in 2017 and doing so in the specific context of Wynter's 2015 'The Ceremony Found', my concern now orients itself slightly more toward the constructive instead of the deconstructive *ethos* of/for critical thinking: With Wynter, I wonder (in the affirmative) about the possibility of a way to envision transformation otherwise than overcoming - the Hegelian 'relève' (*Aufhebung*); otherwise than in the form of a moving on that always acts under the order of definitional clarity regarding 'the ends of man' (philosophical anthropology) and *is* the violence to be avoided? And is this then also a way of practicing transformation otherwise, as a response-able staying with the trouble of ('our') foundational in/determinacy rather than a moving forward; considering also that with in/determinacy as initial condition - especially when it concerns 'us' - everything (also transformation) will always/already be instituted in specificity and therefore remain perspectival? This is how, with the help a slightly different vocabulary (borrowing from Barad, Haraway, and Kirby), I like to understand Wynter's meta-Darwinian "*counter-cosmogeny*" (CF 207), that she refers to also as Césaire's "*new and hybrid 'science of the Word/Nature'*" (CF 209), and from which for her the real possibility of an *ecumenical being human as praxis* is conceivable. Would such incredibly complex attuning to the "*autopoietic institution*" of being human as "*performative enactment*" and "*fictive construction*" (CF, 194-195) of what-and-who-we-are find then more inclusive and more concrete answers to the question 'how to' transform, mutate or 'extricate ourselves'?

Following on Derrida's deconstructive play with the double meaning of 'the ends of man', Wynter shows an equivalent (yet different) teleological-temporal negotiation respectively the 'after' that she proposes in her work. Her forceful 'After Humanism' is for one a clear call for action and for a shift away from the 'overrepresentation' of Man1 (*homo politicus*)/Man2 (*homo oeconomicus*) '[t]owards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn'. This, she states, would indeed "*effect...a mutation...from being human in the purely biocentric terms of our present globally hegemonic, monohumanist and secular Western*" (CF, 193)

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<sup>2</sup> Referring also to Wynter's first text from 1984 "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism".

order. Thus, in Derrida's words, we here find strategy b), i.e. "[t]o decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion" (EoM 135). Only this way - by telling other stories and rewriting knowledges - the ecumenically envisioned 'third event' of *homo narrans*, "our second emergence" (CF 223), will be initiated. Yet, at the very same time transformation as *mutation* for Wynter does not 'move on' or 'leave behind' in the common logic of 'development' - "this *genre* of being human's redemptive telos", as she argues, which "is the same telos lawlikely initiating and enacting of global warming and climate change" (CF 233). Thus, in as much as she claims to change terrain, Wynter's critical aim to 'extricate ourselves' won't leave at all, but instead re-turns (to) the very same vision - being human as praxis and/as humanism - *after* which 'we', and this address functions now in the sense of who- or whatever we are as-a-species, just cannot not be. And this even more affirmatively so if, in the words of Derrida (but this time from a different text), we are still after "'the best, the most respectful, most grateful, and also most giving way of relating to the other and of relating the other to the self' (Derrida 1991, 114).<sup>3</sup>

So, the transformative critical powers of 'The Ceremony Found' and the specific way I see it connected also to the question of an ethics of critique, is the capacity to think 'beyond' and 'after' without ever giving up 'being after' that which seems to be left behind - mindboggling but no contradiction in terms. Pushing for such an 'after' that always doubles itself and in this sense (doesn't) get outside itself, cannot be made aligned to the simple picturing of linear-teleological narration or philosophizing, or of 'finally' solving the riddle of 'who-we-are'. Rather, it shifts the terrain by initiating again - autopoiesis in Wynter's terms, but this can in as much be read in more co- or sympoietic terms (Ettinger 2005, Haraway 2016) - and by taking into account a system(at)icity that lives of a more complicated and warped temporality for "effecting the mutation": Transformation, then, no longer as process of overcoming or simply letting go, but dis/similar as a process of 'abandoning (to)' (Hinton/Xin Liu 2015) in the multidirectional and multidimensional sense of a 're-turning (to)' (Barad 2014; Kaiser/Thiele 2017). This is also a call to action: for being differently (auto/co/sym)poietically instituted as human (not as noun but as praxis) initiates also a different performative enacting, a different 'doing'. As such then this could be the critical transformative powers that also an ethics of critique might propose as the 'Ceremony Found' - or, in the words of Leslie Marmon Silko, who writes of *Ceremony*:

I will tell you something about stories

...

They aren't just entertainment

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

(Silko 1986, 2)

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<sup>3</sup> This is another reference to be added in this pursuit of a more complex 'after': Cadava, Connor and Nancy's 1991 volume on *Who comes after the Subject?*, in which Derrida gave the interview on "Eating Well", from which this passage is taken.

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