

# Preface: Sylvia Wynter's Agonistic Intimations

David Scott

I vividly remember arriving at Sylvia Wynter's (then) home in Palo Alto, California, on the morning of 19 November 1999 (almost exactly sixteen years ago to the day I write this) to conduct my planned interview with her.<sup>1</sup> She greeted me at the door with an embracing smile of incalculable width and warmth and ushered me in to the living room where we would speak over the course of the next two days. It seemed to me such a familiar space, this living room—familiar in the elegant statement of its decor and furnishing, in its formal and subdued gaiety. There was a *just-so* character to it, as though everything had been carefully, deliberately chosen and arranged and now resided exactly where it had always belonged. And though we had never met before, Sylvia, too, was immediately recognizable to me, in her mannered sense of poise and propriety and solidity and decorum, mixed with an undercurrent of mischief and irreverence and an altogether wicked sense of humor. She projected a no-nonsense personality and a formidable intellectual presence that gave you to understand that the time you were now spending with her was of no trifling significance and should not be wasted. It is an experience of sheer intellectual adventure I will not soon forget. In every way, I have always thought, Sylvia Wynter is entirely—and precisely—what Rex Nettleford would have called (with all its Jamaican resonances and inflections) a “lady of quality.”

1 See David Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*, no. 8 (September 2000): 119–207.

At the time I set about making the systematic preparations for the interview some months before I arrived at her doorstep that November morning, I could scarcely have imagined that in the space of little more than a decade Wynter would become something of an iconic figure for a revisionist black intellectual orientation thematized around the trope or the poetics of the “human” (notably rendered in ontological tones as a substantive: *the* human).<sup>2</sup> Certainly she was *already* iconic to me—but perhaps in a less abstract or, in any case, a more *circumscribed* way. To me, at the time, Wynter was one of the predominant figures in a Jamaican (and, more broadly, Anglo-creole Caribbean) intellectual generation, whose work had been formative for my evolving sense of the theoretical languages of postcolonial criticism. *This* is how I’d come to her—feeling my way through the debates about Jamaica’s cultural-political sovereignty. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, though I had read her 1962 novel *The Hills of Hebron* while an undergraduate at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in the late 1970s, and had a sense of its ambiguous place in the canon-forming *doxas* of Caribbean literary criticism (Kenneth Ramchand’s, for example, in *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*), it was less this articulation of her creative impulse that captured my imagination than the nonfiction essays of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> For in these essays, it seemed to me, one could discern, at least in outline, agonistic intimations of a generative style of literary-cultural criticism that turned around the attempt to summon into theoretical intelligibility the paradoxical situation of the African presence in the slave and postslave plantation complexes of the New World. There is no way to even sketch here (much less detail) the rich complexity of the problem-space in which these essays intervene during the first decade of Jamaica’s political independence, but to me essays such as “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture” and “Jonkonnu in Jamaica” mark out a field-forming model of cultural-political theoretical work that, in part at least, sought to work out the answer to a question that might be formulated as follows: How might we figure the relational conundrum of an African presence that was at once an *object* in the dehumanization and acculturation of colonized life and a *subject* in the rehumanization and indigenization of “native” black life?<sup>4</sup>

The interview with Sylvia Wynter was, I believe, the sixth I conducted with Caribbean writers and the fifth actually published in *Small Axe*. It therefore forms part of my overall idea of

2 One thinks of collections such as Anthony Bogues, ed., *After Man, Toward the Human: Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005); and, more recently, Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

3 Ramchand’s judgment is well known. See Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 41. Wynter’s response is embodied in her essay “Creole Criticism: A Critique,” *New World Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1972): 12–36.

4 See Sylvia Wynter, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism, Part 1,” *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4 (1968): 23–32; “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism, Part 2,” *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 1 (1969): 27–42; and “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Toward the Interpretation of Folk Dance as Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970): 34–48. In *Contradictory Omens*, of course, Kamau Brathwaite would productively engage Wynter on this theme; indeed, one might well see *Contradictory Omens* and “Black Metamorphosis” as being in a kind of dialogue with each other. See Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona: Savacou, 1974), 15–16.

mapping the temporal contours of overlapping Caribbean intellectual generations and also part of my overall idea of the Small Axe Project as a platform on which to think through our intellectual inheritances and traditions.<sup>5</sup> All the interviews I've conducted doubtlessly have their specificities, not to say their idiosyncrasies. They have all been challenging in distinct (and, I hope, *productive*) ways. Each has involved a steep learning curve on my part because in every instance I was obliged to adjust and readjust myself hastily to the styles of thinking-out-loud of my various interlocutors, and therefore to adjust and readjust my expectations regarding the temporally, contingently, unfolding dialogical realities. For example, during my interview with Richard Hart in London in 1997 and 1998, he always insisted on immediately getting up to go check his voluminous files to make sure he had given me the correct information. The facts mattered to him. With Sylvia, what I remember most pronouncedly is her resistance to my urging that for the moment she lay aside her *current* theoretical framework and simply reconstruct for me the past as she *remembered* living and thinking it. It quickly and somewhat disconcertingly struck me that for her the past (including her own past) was not over; it was not the past. The past for her was *still* a part of her present and *therefore* still under revision, still open to contestation and change, still open to being recast and reanimated in new theoretical languages. *That* is where she was, not where I imagined she *should* be. She would not sum it all up retrospectively. She would not allow herself so easily to be relegated to being an object of (what might have appeared) an *antiquarian* inquiry. She had not stopped thinking, after all. Indeed, she had barely begun, it could be argued. So, that evening when I returned to my hotel (or, not quite a hotel; it was actually a Motel 6 in a strip mall not far from Sylvia's house) I was obliged to revise the interview questions substantially, and together with these, revise my whole dialogical strategy.

Over the years, *Small Axe* has published critical essays on Wynter's work.<sup>6</sup> In this issue, however, we venture a larger project—a critical discussion of an unpublished 900-plus-page manuscript, “Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World.” (I am grateful to my *Small Axe* colleague Aaron Kamugisha for urging us to undertake this discussion and for helpfully guiding the process from start to finish.) Curiously, “Black Metamorphosis” is not mentioned in my interview with Sylvia. To my shame, I had not known of its existence, and she did not seem to feel it might have been—or *should* have been—of interest to me. How could this have happened? What clues had I missed in constructing my map of her work? What was Wynter's relation to the text of “Black Metamorphosis” at the time of my interview? How would she have told the story of the part it played in the evolution of her thinking about black life? What story

5 See David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): 157–81.

6 See, for example, Natasha Barnes, “Reluctant Matriarch: Sylvia Wynter and the Problematics of Caribbean Feminism,” *Small Axe*, no. 5 (March 1999): 34–47; and Shirley Toland-Dix, “*The Hills of Hebron*: Sylvia Wynter's Disruption of the Narrative of the Nation,” *Small Axe*, no. 25 (February 2008): 57–75.

might she have told me about what got in the way of its completion and publication? Alas, these are questions I cannot now answer. Written with a view to publication by the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta (an enormously important organization that was to attract the participation of a number of Caribbean intellectuals in the early 1970s), “Black Metamorphosis” is in many respects an attempt to expand and elaborate the thesis of *indigenization* expounded in the earlier essays.<sup>7</sup> Confronting what Wynter discloses as the persistently haunting anxiety of a black “cultural void” in which only mimicry can be born, she now availed herself of the opportunity to provide a broader, more integrated theoretical-historical canvas for her story of how an African becomes a native in the context of New World plantation slavery—the material and metaphysical metamorphosis that *constitutes* the New World black as both an object of power and a subject of creative endeavor. And for Wynter, notably, while this is broadly a story of New World experience, she aims to elaborate its structure and ideology largely through the exemplary lens of the Caribbean, and Jamaica especially.

Each of the essays in our section on “Black Metamorphosis” takes up the text from a different perspective and holds it before us in such a way as to afford us a vivid glimpse of Sylvia’s practice of thinking about a “little culture” at a fundamental conjuncture of her intellectual life. All of them enact a critical return that is at once an index of our present. *This* is a recurrent activity at the heart of the work of *Small Axe*. I find myself endlessly repeating that part of what we are concerned with in the Small Axe Project is an ever-*recursive* mode of reflective thinking. In various iterations, we are forever in the loop of a nonrepetitive *return* from a present in which we contingently find ourselves to some past (recent or not) in order to try to discern something new, something *else*, about our Caribbean intellectual inheritances, something that we had not previously known or understood, perhaps, or known or understood in a way that *now* (in a new conjuncture) makes different sense, strikes us as worth knowing in a changed or expanded way. Ours, I believe, is this constant work of provisional, reiterative *edification* and *clarification*, a constant, reopening reengagement with those—like Sylvia Wynter—we thought we knew but who can now belong to us in new and unexpected ways.

New York—Leiden, November 2015

7 For a fascinating account of the Institute of the Black World that takes up the question of Caribbean intellectuals, see Derrick White, *The Challenge of Blackness: The Institute of the Black World and Political Activism in the 1970s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).