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This You Call Humanity? ¹

However, in the wake of the West's second wave of imperial expansion, pari passu with its reinvention of in Man now purely biologized terms, it was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the "racially inferior" Human Other, with the range of other colonized dark-skinned peoples, all classified as "natives," now being assimilated to its category—all of these as the ostensible embodiment of the non-evolved backward Others—if to varying degrees and, as such, the negation of the generic "normal humanness," ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West.

- Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument"

I have nothing to say.

Fellow Other, Audrey Chin gives me words for my Nothing-to-Say in her prose poem "We Are Who Freaks Us" thusly:

"A roiling in the heart area. A tight tight something in the abdomen. An ache in the lower back. Fire, trying to get out."

Can I, should I speak about "universal human rights"? I struggled with this topic, until I realized there's nothing to say.

For, what is there to say about human rights for those of us Others who have been historically "thingified" into subhumans?² What is there to say about those who don't quite fit in the universe of, to quote Sylvia Wynter, "normal humanness"?

Nothing, unless we are willing to go back 500 years or so in Western-centric modernity, which has structured the modern world and universality according to oppositional relationships such as subject-object, human-animal, rational-irrational, free-enslaved, normative-Other.

If this is too abstract, let me try to make it concrete: What can be said about an Orange Turd who grabs pussies, hates African-Americans, repeatedly attempts to ban Muslims, proposes to build wall between itself and Mexico, and cannot bear to shake the hand of a woman president? Or his European counterparts who inaugurated the Brexit moment?

Not much. Though I'm sure more can be said by those surprised at the re-emergence of the right wing in the West, or surprised that the "progress" of Western "humanity" and "development" has brought us here.

For those of us who are unsurprised, we have long recognized what Professor Cornel West calls "the dark side of modernity," the underbelly of the Enlightenment. We recognize the neglect of that inconvenient truth: that the "progress" of the "modern world" has been underwritten by anti-black

¹ From Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's "This You Call Civilization?"

² From Aimé Césaire's 1950 essay "Discourse on Colonialism"

institutions of genocide, slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and neo-colonialism. As such, we might appreciate Susan Sontag's 1967 sentiment, that "[i]f America is the culmination of Western white civilization... there must be something terribly wrong with Western white civilization." Or, as Frantz Fanon's nuances in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961): "Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions."

If the West could re-imagine a humanity not dependent on dehumanization, perhaps I'd have more to say. I'd speak of how the Bantu-language speakers in Southern Africa conceptualize humanity and personhood—not according to Descartes', "I think therefore I am," but rather through the philosophy of Ubuntu which is contained in the Zulu-language aphorism, "*Umntu ngumuntu nga bantu*" (We are therefore I am). In *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (1999), Ramose elaborates: "to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis establish humane relations with them."⁴

This has critical implications. As Calvin Warren puts it in "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," Western philosophy "constructed the rational subject *against* the non-reasoning black, who, according to Hegel, Kant, Hume, and even Nietzsche was situated outside of history, moral law, and consciousness" such that "thinking itself is structured by anti-blackness from the very start."

From here, we come to see racism, and anti-black racism, as an organizing concept related to a debate or contest concerning the quality and universality of humanness (which racists doubt and anti-racists assert). In other words, racism is best understood as the systematic doubt of the humanity of certain people. By systematic we mean the corralling of social, economic, and cultural institutions to enforce the sub-human, or less-human-than others, status of black people globally. Where, on one hand conservative thought has outright rejected the possibility of the humanity of the Other, on the other, liberal humanism has asserted that the Other can "theoretically" acquire human status through assimilation into European culture, quote unquote "civilization."³

Here we come for circle. For some, the civilizational crisis following the wave of the "Trexit" moment has been a surprise. For those of us Others, however, who have borne the brunt of a dehumanization that is not incidental, but rather integral to its rise and maintenance, we find ourselves without much to say.

And so I might have more to say about "universal human rights," if we were willing to consider the violences subsumed within it.

Until then, if I do speak, if I do say something, the fire might just get out. And I'm not quite sure. No, I know, The World as we know it would not survive *this fire, this time*.

³ See Ndumiso Dladla, *Here Is a Table: A History of the Philosophy of Race in South Africa*, 2016

⁴ In *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Congolese priest Benezet Bujo (2001) concretizes the difference in outlook so: "For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* [I am related, therefore we are] that is decisive."