

THE DEHUMANIZING MISSION OF IMPERIAL REASON AND HUMANIZING BLACKNESS

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“Dirty Nigger”! Or simply, “Look, a Negro”!

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects....

All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.” (Frantz Fanon “The Fact of Blackness”. *Black Skin, White Masks* 1967 109)

Calling attention to the European civilizing mission as an effective strategy of imperial control, postcolonial writers and scholars have sought to unpack the complex process through which a large proportion of the world's population was denied human status by the legitimacy accorded to Christian theology by eighteenth century ethnoscience in British and other imperialisms that often intersected with the discourse of slavery. A large body of literature in the eighteenth century is devoted to examining the claims of black people, who are often described as a different ‘species’, to human status. For this reason, black writers and intellectuals have implicated European religion, history and philosophy in the dehumanizing project of Imperialism through which imperial reason staked its moral claims to rule the colonies. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's oft quoted opinion of Conrad ‘as a bloody racist’, for instance, was endorsed by fellow Nigerian Wole Soyinka in his Nobel Lecture when he made a similar charge against some of the greatest western thinkers and philosophers just as African-American writing bears witness to the dehumanization of black slaves. Homi Bhabha's insertion of the discourse of race into what he calls “the ambivalent temporality of modernity” calls attention to “the ‘colonial’ disjunction between modern times and colonial and slave histories”. (2006 221) Arguing that the “moral, modern

disposition of mankind, enshrined in the sign of the revolution, only fuels the archaic racial factor in the society of slavery", Bhabha explains that modernity needs to create "a rhetoric of retroversion for the emergence of racism". (2006 219) Drawing on Benedict Anderson's view of "colonial racism as a strange historical suture in the narrative of the nation's modernity", he shows how "the representation of racism as 'ahistorical' outside the progressive myth of modernity" structures its split-consciousness. (2006 222) Through examining imperial and postcolonial texts, this paper focuses on the nexus between reason, writing and the imperial text in writing black people out of history, culture, and humanity and their reinscription into the human race through the technology of writing.

As the first to theorize the black condition formally, Frantz Fanon offers a good starting point for focusing the question of blackness and the limits of the human. Fanon's unmasking of "the corporeal schema" exchangeable with "a racial epidermal schema" through which blackness is inscribed with "cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects" (1967 112) and so on evokes the history of the construction of the black people as "savages, brutes, illiterates". (1967 117) Although half a century separates the revolutionary and philosopher from Martinique from "the King of Pop" Michael Jackson, who died in 2009 allegedly of an overdose of prescription painkillers, the shared black experience of negating corporeal consciousness could account for the global icon's "hopeless task of sculpting and bleaching" himself "into a simulacrum of a white man", which "suggests a profound loathing of blackness". (Gates 2009 Npg) Fanon's reported production of a "serum for 'denegrification'" in laboratories worldwide "that might make it possible for the Negro to whiten himself" appears both prophetic and diabolical in light of Michael Jackson's fatal attempt to "throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction". (Fanon 1967 111) Similarly, Henry Louis Gates Jr's arrest in 2009 his own home demonstrates that his credentials as "the nation's most famous black scholar", did not emancipate him from the burden of blackness in the year America elected its first black President reinforcing the continuity of the historico-racial schema in the present. In "wanting to be a man among other men", Fanon was articulating the longings of an entire group of people whose claim to human status was challenged through an arbitrary definition of being human in which physiognomy became linked to mental or spiritual attributes. (1967)

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon equates dehumanization to being "an object among other objects" through his being fixed by the glance of the other or "being for others" (1967 109). The black man's problem, according to him, is not of being black but of being black in relation to

the white man because of the ontological impossibility of blackness within the western episteme. The other important point that Fanon makes is the gap between the west's intellectual understanding/knowledge of the equality of all beings and ground realities. Citing his own experience of being fixed as an object of the white gaze, he shows that it was impossible for the black person to inhabit a physiological space consisting of "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character but to mould itself into the image of the other as produced by the white self. (1967 111) This remaking of himself as an object, in Fanon's view, is the source of the black person's dehumanization. Focusing largely on the construction of the "Negro" as an alterity to the white in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon engages specifically with the logical conclusion of Christian Manicheism in the native's dehumanization and its turning "him into an animal" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. (1968 42) He examines the zoological terms - "the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations" - employed by the settler to describe the native and other references to "the bestiary" to show how their naturalization in the colonial vocabulary dispossesses the native of his humanity. (1968 42)

Following Kenyan writer Ngugi wa thiong'o's description of Karen Blixen as a racist author in his essay "Literature and Society" and inclusion of her text among those that "define the colonized world for the European colonizer" (1973 16) *Out of Africa* and *Shadows of the Grass*, Baroness Karen Blixen's (Isak Dinesen) memoir about her life on a farm in Kenya, has come to be regarded as a textbook illustration of the reification and dehumanization of black people that Fanon had located at the base of the imperial mission. Notwithstanding the justifications provided by white scholars to exonerate Blixen from racist allegations, the tone and imagery of her text is unambiguous in tracing a Christian trajectory through which the black person has been reified through his cosmic location between the natural, the animal and the human.

The Natives were Africa in flesh and blood. The tall extinct volcano of Longonot that rises above the Rift Valley, the broad mimosa trees along the rivers, the elephant and the giraffe, were not more truly Africa than the Natives were — small figures in an immense scenery. All were different expressions of one idea, variations upon the same theme. (Blixen 26-27 1984)

Despite her admirers' citation of her self-description as a 'Lioness', Ngugi finds her deployment of animal imagery in her description of native people, such as her 'manservant' Kamante whose actions she compares to those of "a civilized dog, that has lived for a long time with people, will place a bone on the floor before you, as a present" extremely offensive. (Blixen

1984) Beneath Blixen's ostensible exoticization of native Africans, Ngugi detects both a paternalism and a corporeally structured historico-racial schema predicated on a Christian hierarchical arrangement in which blackness ranks below the animal and the natural. In his formulation of the Manichean allegory, Abdul R Jan Mohamed classifies Blixen's novel in his category of 'symbolic' texts, whose writer "tends to fetishize a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native". (2006 20) Arguing that "the power of the 'imaginary' binding the narcissist colonialist text is nowhere better illustrated than in the fetishization of the Other", which works by "substituting natural or generic categories for those that are socially or ideologically determined", he cites her description as an extreme form of fetishization that "transmutes all specificity and difference into a magical essence", which he calls an "essentialist metonymy". (2006 21) JanMohamed shows that "ideological function" of the Manichean allegory is "to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world in addition to prolonging colonialism". (2006 22)

Comparing the stereotyped representation of the Jewish other in the white imaginary with the black other, Fanon asserts, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that despite the history of persecution structuring white Jewish relations, the Jews have never been denied their humanity unlike the black person who is viewed as "a new kind of man, a new genus". (1967 116) His description of white Jewish hostility as a "family quarrel" is confirmed by the figuration of Africa as "the heart of darkness" in Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*, in which the protagonist, on encountering the Masai, "the nomadic, cattle-owning nation" of Blixen's novels is at once fascinated and repelled: "You have to understand that these people love their cattle like brothers and sister, like children". (Bellow 1974 192)

Henry Louis Gates Jr's arrest by a police officer on July 20 2009 in his own residence for allegedly "unruly" behaviour foregrounds the stereotyped associations of blackness with mental and moral proclivities that has been the subject of many of the African-American scholar's books. It evokes the ghost of James Somersett, "a negro" who became the celebrated case for eighteenth century debates on the nature of the negro led by one Samuel Estwick, the assistant agent of the island of Barbados. Gates Jr shows how Estwick's tract *Consideration on the Negro Cause* published in 1772 reveals "the fashion in which romance, myth and metaphor, coupled with rather imaginative anatomical and philosophical disquisitions, meet in the vulgar practical application of the metaphor of a chain of being as a rigid construct of nature, which somehow is held to exist in fact". (Gates Jr 1987 62) Estwick's rationalization of distinctions between human beings through the distinctions between the natural and

animal world draws on Locke's use of reason and the existence of moral sense to distinguish humans from beasts as well as on Hume's idea of different kinds or species of men to justify the Christian notion of the chain of being. He picks up Locke's privileging of reason, which serves "to raise[man] from the tenth to the ten thousandth link of the chain" and marries it to Hume's theory of the tropical degeneration of the human mind to distinguish humans by "their natural capacity or incapacity of exerting in degree the rational powers, or faculties of understanding" and adds to it "the moral sense or moral powers" to conclude that the Negro is a man apart from the inhabitants of Europe and destined to be a slave. (Gates Jr 1987 66) Gates Jr's unveiling of the relationship between the contradictions between the Enlightenment myth of reason and the discourse of slavery has established the complicity of western religion and philosophy in the denial of humanity to the black person through the construction of a complex corporeal schema in which mental and spiritual capacities were mapped on physiognomy and skin colour. The earnestness with which western philosophers and thinkers engaged with the presence or absence of arbitrary traits or qualities that were valorized or devalorized would be amusing if not for the role they played in the justification of slavery. Irrespective of their verity or verifiability, the humiliating experiences of black people from Phillis Wheatley and Fanon to Gates Jr himself confirm their continuing hold on the western imagination.

Gates Jr underlines the emblematic status of Estwick's piece that articulated the shared concerns of European and American philosophers wrestling with the unreconcilable contradictions of human enslavement by providing an overview of the pamphlet debate over African mental capacity that raged in Philadelphia later the same year in which Phillis, "the Negro servant to John Wheatley of Boston", played a key role. He unpacks the relationship between environmentalist thinking beginning with Sir William Temple in 1690 and the political ideology of the revolution predicated on the rights of man following Locke's denial of the existence of innate ideas and Rush's assertion that the human nature was the same. Due to the assertions of the sameness of human nature during this period, he argues, environmentalism offered a convenient explanation for making distinctions between various peoples. His identification of instances of disjuncture between the argument about the natural rights of mankind and the justification of slavery foregrounds a fundamental ambivalence at the base of western imperialism in which the institution of slavery could be justified only by showing that "the African race are not men". (David Cooper quoted in Gates Jr 1987 67)

Through his analysis of the debates generated by the publication of an anonymous pamphlet *Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlement in America, Upon Slave-Keeping* by Benjamin Rush, a noted Philadelphia physician, Gates Jr proceeds to show how the publication of a slim volume of poems by an eighteen year old slave girl, Phillis Wheatley, becomes the site for the contestation over "the rights of man". Viewing Rush as "the first anti-slavery advocate to cite the poetry of Phillis Wheatley as an irrefutable proof of the African's mental equality with the European and of the African's fundamentally human nature", he shows how it catalyzed a public debate involving the most respectable figures of the time. (1987 67) He views Rush's use of environmentalism and aesthetic relativism to refute the biblical exegesis about the chain of being, which was carried over by philosophy as a brilliant strategy that turned the natural rights thesis on its head to establish the equality of blacks and whites. His summary of the response to Rush's pamphlet by Richard Nesbit's anonymous publication of "Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture: Or a Defense of the west Indian Planters" that cited the same climactic argument to allow for exceptionalism and Rush's rebuttal "A Vindication of the Address, To the Inhabitants of the British Settlements, on the Slavery of the Negroes in America, In Answer to a Pamphlet" is valuable for its revelation of the fact that barely two hundred years ago African mental capacity was still in doubt and that the Negro's place in nature and the debate on slavery could be determined by the presence or absence of genius in a "few silly poems" of a Negro girl in Boston, as Nesbitt described them. (1987 70) Notwithstanding the differences between pro and anti slavery champions, the earnestness with which environmentalism was used to elucidate the differences between human beings and the requirement that the black self must produce evidence to make a case for his humanity is underlined by the trial that the young girl had to face to prove her authorship of her poems. Elsewhere Gates Jr describes the attestation of the teenaged black girl on October 8 1772 before an eighteen member jury consisting of venerable members of the dominant community to press home his point about Africans' status to the human resting on Phillis Wheatley's capacity for writing poetry. (2002 Npg) Arguing that "in the hands of this group, a self-constituted judge and jury, rested the fate of a teenage slave named Phillis Wheatley, and to a certain extent the destiny of the African American people, on that October day in 1772", Gates Jr reconstructs "one of the most dramatic contests over literacy, authenticity, and humanity in the history of race relations in this country". (2002 Npg) Quite rightly, he describes Wheatley as a synecdoche who stood for Africa's mental capacity and her poems for African civilization and systematically

establishes the relationship between reason, writing and humanity before focusing on the high stakes involved in the black adolescent's capability of writing poetry. His reminder that Phillis' appearance before the tribunal must be contextualized against the vast body of Renaissance and Enlightenment literature debating on the "humanity" of Africans, which could be summarized simply as whether they were human beings descended along with Europeans from a common ancestor or if they were, as Hume had put it in 1753, another "species of men" related more to apes. If Wheatley could conclusively prove that she had indeed written the poems that were attributed to her, the Euro-american world was willing not only to set her free but also to concede the rationality and humanity of the black race. While Gates Jr engages with the question whether the humanity of the Africans was essentially related to the possession of reason, it is not quite clear how the faculty of reason becomes connected, following Hume, with the capacity to create "arts and sciences". Meticulously establishing the European philosophical tradition represented by Hume and Kant as racist, he concludes that Phillis "was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people".¹ (2002 Npg)

Writing could be privileged as the instrument of reason and used to denigrate black people and cultures only through a reversal of the west's inherent phonocentricism since western thought, in general, has historically valorized speech as primary and authentic and relegated writing to secondariness and inauthenticity. The suspicion of writing is traced back to the oft-quoted passage from Plato's *Phaedrus* in which King Thamus, warns the god Thoth that writing would affect human beings' power to remember. Plato's distinction between false memory, improved by the technology of writing, and real memory, between the semblance of wisdom and real wisdom and between seeming to know much and knowing nothing (Plato *Phaedrus* 275 a-b) has been debated for centuries as are his views on the naturalized relationship between speech and understanding, between the spoken word and meaning. In view of the widely held view of the spoken word as the repository of knowledge and the devaluation of writing that has been carried over even in modern linguistic theories such as those of Saussure and the effects of western logocentricism that reach down to the present day, it is pertinent to inquire the reasons for the appropriation of writing as the prime instrument of reason in imperialism. This movement appears to have begun with the Age of Enlightenment in the mid-decades of the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century with its absolute faith in the power of Reason to lead humankind into an advanced stage of progress. Enlightenment regarded Reason as an instrument of emancipating one from the medieval world-view based on faith and from immaturity to maturity and writing as the seat of Reason.

Imperialism's strategic appropriation of writing and reason to societies without writing to justify its rule foregrounds the relationship between writing and power.

The tradition of western science and philosophy that situates the logos, the word or act of speech as epistemologically superior and logocentric linguistics that confirms the phonic sound of the word coupled with the sense of the word as the ideal location of metaphysical significance presents speech as a presence. The notion of writing as a sign of a sign runs from Aristotle (384BC-322BC), 'spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words' to Rousseau (1712-1778): 'writing is nothing but the representation of speech; it is bizarre that one gives more care to the determining of the image than to the object'. Denial of Reason and humanity to those without writing even as it continued to insist on the primacy of speech belongs to the string of contradictions that underpin imperialist thinking. But imperialism's deployment of writing in colonized cultures confirms the relationship between writing and power disclosed by Ong and Levi-Strauss. Viewing writing as a technology and the written word as "frozen, and in a sense dead", Ong was the first to call attention to the political effects of writing. In his critique of writing, Levi-Strauss held that the real reason for writing was not scientific or philosophical advancement but to 'facilitate subjugation' or to increase social oppression as illustrated by the incident of the Nambikwara Chief who had instantly recognized that writing gives some individuals power over others. It was Levi-Strauss who pointed to the historical coincidence between the invention of writing and social and economic stratification. While Derrida has effectively deconstructed the Nambikwara episode to reveal the presence of classificatory structures that were used by non-literate societies in the absence of writing, the role of writing in subjugating colonized subjects and knowledges cannot be denied.

Whether writing contributed to scientific advancement or not, the complicity of the new scientific disciplines in using pseudo-sciences to promote a form of scientific racism has been well established. The scientific racism of eighteenth century pseudosciences intersects with Enlightenment thought in its denial of Reason and humanity to the black people. This racism is articulated either in the monogenism of European naturalists and scientists such as Johann Blumenbach, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon or the polygenism of Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and Georges Cuvier (1769-1832). As Gates Jr demonstrates, the most revered names in European philosophy including Voltaire, Kant (1724-1804), Hegel (1770-1831) and Schopenhauer (1788-1860) subscribed to the climatology or environmentalism of the polygenists. However, it was the valorization of

Reason in the rationalism of Descartes, one of the key figures in eighteenth century scientific revolution that Reason came to be regarded as the measure of humanity and writing as the visible sign of Reason. Gates Jr argues that Hume provided the legitimacy of enlightenment philosophy to the myth about Africans' rejection of writing cited by the seventeenth century Dutch explorer William Bosman and that it was subsequently confirmed by Kant and Hegel. Having established Reason as a sign of humanity and writing as a visible sign of Reason, the inhumanity of people without writing could be logically inferred.

Without writing, no repeatable sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist. (Gates Jr. 1987 11)

The imperial logic that served as the perfect justification for the control of the colonized people was obviously not without its contradictions. Black people were not deemed to be human because they could not write and, thus, reason. But they could not write because they were forbidden by law to write. The relationship between political and economic alienation with racial alienation is foregrounded through a 1740 Southern California statute quoted by Gates Jr that made it impossible for black slaves to acquire, leave alone, master literacy.

Despite Phillis Wheatley's having successfully proved the black person's capacity to create arts and sciences, black creativity still required rituals of authentication from the white world against a historical backdrop in which the ghosts of Hume and Kant could not be easily exorcised.² More than two hundred years later, the first black recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wole Soyinka pointed out that the greatest figures in western thought – "Hegel, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire – an endless list – were unabashed theorists of racial superiority and denigrators of the African history and being". (1986 Npg) In his acceptance speech, Soyinka broke the polite silence with respect to race in the western world by addressing the historical discourse of slavery and colonization and implicating the white world in the most heinous of crimes against humanity. His recall of the symbolic significance of each act of defiance – Sharpsville, 1930s burning of passes, the 1919 protest against the Native Pass Law and other "acts of racial terror as an acknowledgment of improved knowledge and respect for the potential of what is feared" imbued the black writer's standing before the Swedish academy with a symbolic significance. (1986 Npg) He unambiguously positioned himself as a representative figure whose winning the award was connected in a similar way to the rights of the black person as Wheatley's and his winning the highest Euro-american literary honour as a historic victory for the entire

black world. The first black Nobel Laureate's address to the white other rather than the black self carried strong overtones of speaking back with the triumphal moment of black creativity turning into an inquisition: "In your anxiety to prove that this moment is not possible, you had killed, maimed, silenced, tortured, exiled, debased and dehumanized hundreds of thousands encased in this very skin, crowned with such hair, proudly content with their very being"?(1986 Npg)

Citing the Hola Camp to illustrate black white relations, he expressed astonishment at the fact that the white overseers "clearly did not experience the reality of the victims as human beings. Animals perhaps, a noxious form of vegetable life maybe, but certainly not human". (1986 Npg) It was Soyinka who demonstrated how "sub-human" denigration of black people became the altruistic remedy for the "civilizing mission" and established their connection with "imperial greed". (Soyinka 1986 Npg) His allusions to the naturalization of race thinking among the whites who "had no conceptual space in their heads which could be filled - except very rarely and exceptionally - by "the black as also human" drummed the historical significance of the black man receiving the award across the world. (1986 Npg) However, it was his shocking revelation of the persistence of such attitudes voiced by Eddie Roux, the Afrikaaner political rebel and scientist, at the turn of the 20th century that epitomized the Afrikaner attitude in the present:

The African was on a different plane, hardly human, part of the scene as were dogs and trees and, more remotely, cows. I had no special feelings about him, not interest nor hate nor love. He just did not come into my social picture. So completely had I accepted the traditional attitudes of the time. (Roux in Soyinka 1986 Npg)

Quick to point out the contradiction between "a mind's racial tabula rasa, if you like - in the first decade of this century and the time, in short, when the Nobel series of prizes was inaugurated", Soyinka viewed his recognition as an antidote to the dehumanizing label implicit in the Native Pass Laws. He consciously used the space provided him by the Swedish academy as an opportunity to voice the hurt and anger of the black people at their dehumanizing treatment even in the present summing up an entire history of race relations and race thinking that persists even in the twenty first century in his brief address. He deftly transformed the paternalistic celebration of the black spirit into a searing reminder of the long history of oppression to prevent it from becoming "a troublesome event of no enduring significance". (1986 Npg)

Soyinka's Nobel lecture is remarkable in its reiteration of imperial metaphors through the imagery of nature and nurture, metaphors of the jungle and of inherent infantilism of the African, which are then turned

against the imperial construction. It is interesting that Soyinka should have turned the west's own environmentalism and its "jealously guarded sovereignty of Nature and the Cosmos" by viewing the explosion of black creativity in terms of man tempering "his environment, adapting, moderating, converting, harmonizing, and even subjugating". (1986 Npg) Drawing on the nineteenth century vocabulary to remind the European world of its history of violence, his prose touched poetic heights as he demanded "from that world that is finally coming to itself, a measure of expiation". (1986 Npg) He made a deft transition from documenting the denigration of black people to the exoticization of black art particularly during the Expressionist movement through the discoveries of Africanists such as the German Leo Frobenius Van Lvyck. Calling Frobenius "a racial slanderer" in addition to being "a notorious plunderer", Soyinka demonstrated the schizophrenic split in individuals such as Frobenius whose deep appreciation of African art went side by side with "racial condescensions". (1986 Npg) He touched upon the colonization of African space by the imperialist masters by overwriting the places of the colonized with their own and the discursive indenturement of black people through the works of Frobenius, of Hume, Hegel, or Montesquieu. In what would appear like a masterly stroke, Soyinka concluded the lecture by invoking the spirit of Christianity to underline the largeheartedness of the black people. However, it is the final paragraph in which he logically demonstrated Apartheid as contradicting the spirit of modernity that the nexus between imperialism, dehumanization and modernity was exposed. Through his critical engagement with the philosophical and aesthetic tradition represented by Hume, Hegel and others, Soyinka was, in Gates Jr's words, "signifyin(g) upon the figure of the chain itself"(1989:167).

Gates' unmasking of the Cartesian privileging of reason and the view of writing as "the visible sign of reason", Hume's notion of writing as "the ultimate sign of difference between animal and human" demonstrated the importance of the "recording of an authentic black voice" through which the "African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the human being". (1985 11) By winning the highest honour for the black people, Soyinka was bringing the task began by the five pioneers named by Gates of "deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited to prove the absence of the African's humanity" to a logical conclusion(2006 218) Like other black writers writing "as if their lives depended on it", Soyinka wrote the black people "out of slavery". The "signifyin(g) upon writing as violence is visible in other black voices from Africa and African diaspora. Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, thematizes the commonly held ideas of irresistible racial differences in 1850 through the experiments conducted

by the schoolmaster on the 'menbred slaves' to determine their human and animal characteristics by wrapping string around Sethe's head, nose and behind and counting her teeth. (Morrison 1991 173) Paul D, one of the six men on Sweet Home, who survived to tell the tale, is made to understand the difference between being treated like a human being and being dehumanized when, bit on mouth, he imagines the rooster Mister smile at his bondage. Chinua Achebe admitted that his motivation behind writing *Things Fall Apart* was to tell the world that the African past was not one long night of savagery from which the white man, acting on God's behalf, delivered them. As writing was the prime instrument of imperialism through which blackness was figured as an absence, the act of writing becomes the means with which the black writer reinscribes the black person into human race. Through using writing, the prime culprit in the denigration of blackness, in emancipating the black race, black writers turn the master's tools against himself.

Yet "Black people, as we know, have not been liberated from racism by our writings", Gates Jr's words have a prophetic ring in light of his own recent experience(1985 12)

Gates Jr points out that in the "the recording of an authentic black voice" through which "the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the human being" or that through writing themselves out of slavery black writers(Gates Jr 1987 12-13) fell into a trap through accepting the premises of the western discourse. In other words, there is a certain irony in black writers' writing themselves and the black race out of slavery into humanity in that they themselves become complicit in the destruction of their oral cultures through the act of writing. If the written word is death, as Ong maintained, Chantal Zubus, in an essay on Chinua Achebe, brought out the implications of the incorporation of African traditional oral material that she called 'ethno-text' for the demise of orality(1990 20) through the linguistic concept of glottophobia, which means the swallowing of languages that don't go into print by those that do resulting in the extinction of the former. In their deployment of writing to celebrate speech, African writers become implicated in the violence that was writing and repeat the Levi-Straussian gesture of resorting to writing in order to establish the authenticity of speech and innocence of oral societies. Although the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa thiong'o has proposed orature as a term for defining Africa's creativity that remained unwritten, the majority of black writers, including thiong'o, have adopted writing as a panacea for recovering the African self.

This ambivalence of writing is, however, implicit in the Greek term *pharmakon* [poison; cure] that Derrida deconstructs to show the nature of writing. Derrida's reading of *Phaedrus* shows that the failure of Plato's text

to accomplish what its arguments explicitly require: the priority of speech, logos and presence over writing. Writing serves as both poison and cure, as it is a threat to the living presence of authentic (spoken) language as well as indispensable means for anyone to record, transmit or commemorate that presence. Like Plato, the black author is condemned to writing, even as he denounces its effects and upholds the authority of self-present speech. Unlike Levi-Strauss, whose recognition of his own culpability in bringing the corrupting effects of writing to societies with no knowledge of writing, leads to self recrimination, black writers appear to be oblivious to their implication in the violence of writing.

Therefore, the restoration of humanity to the black people resuscitate through the act of writing fails to emancipate the black writer from discursive indenturement to the west, which appears to be a problematic of post-colonial discourse in general. Like the black writer who is condemned to writing while foregrounding its violence, black and post-colonial discourse is bound in a relationship of discursive indenturement to the west. In borrowing imperial discourse to inscribe the presence of black or colonized cultures, the writer succeeds in turning the master's tools against the master but also becomes implicated in the violence of the discourse in which these cultures and societies figured as an absence. In doing so, he also confirms, even though positively, the imperial syllogism through which black people were denied human status: Black people can write. So they are human. To be fully human, writing would have to be disengaged from reason and humanity and other criteria for defining the limits of the human be evolved. Such as orality, which the writer is ill-equipped to through his own corruption by the knowledge of literacy.

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NOTES

1. We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.
2. I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. (Hume)
The Negroes of Africa have, by nature, no feeling that rises above the trifling... So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.... [if a] man [is] black from head to foot, [it is] a clear proof that what he said was stupid. (Kant)