

Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables That Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters

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Zona torida non est inhabitabilis, quia per cem hodie navigant Portugallenses, imo est populatissima; et sub linea equinoxialis est castrum Mine Serenissimi regis Portugalie, quem uidimos [It is not uninhabitable because the Portuguese sail through it even today, it is in fact thickly populated; and under the equator is the Castle of Mina of his Serene Highness, the King of Portugal, which we have seen].

—Columbus' marginal jotting on his copy of
Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*

Mare totum navigabile [All seas are navigable].

—Columbus' jotting on the margin of another book

Are our behaviors as contemporary human beings—behaviors that have now led to what ecologists term our “insult” to Nature and the threat that this poses to our planetary habitat—induced and regulated in as lawlike a manner as those of all non-human species? One of the effects, both good and evil, of the voyage of Columbus was to make possible the conceptualization that there were laws of nature that should hold in the same way for all areas of the earth—that the “descensus lapidum in *Europa* et in *America*” [descent of stones in Europe and in America], being the same in effect, should have the same cause, as Isaac Newton wrote.¹

The fifteenth-century voyages by the Portuguese and Columbus and the 1543 publication of Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium*

coelestium led to a "new image of the earth and conception of the cosmos."² On the basis of this new conception, Newton found himself empowered, as Amos Funkenstein notes, to make a new demand: that "nature" should now be seen as being "homogeneous, uniform, symmetrical."³ All scientists of the seventeenth century came to subscribe to this vision, replacing the tradition of Latin-Christian Europe that had been accepted with "epistemological resignation."⁴ According to that tradition, the earth was divided into habitable and uninhabitable regions, and the universe was divided by an ontological difference of substance between the unchanging and incorruptible perfection of a celestial realm that moved in harmoniously ordered circles and the degraded fallen realm of the terrestrial, that is, of an earth fixed and motionless at the center of the universe.⁵ In the new conception, by contrast, as Funkenstein continues:

No more should separate regions of the universe obey, as is the case in Aristotle's physics, different mathematical models, such as the "natural" motion in straight lines, that is, upwards or downwards, within the sublunar realm of the universe, as against the circular, eternal motion that is natural only within the celestial region. The same kind of matter ought to build all parts of the universe, and it ought to be governed by the same causes or forces. How else could we reason, as Newton expects us to, from the "analogy of Nature"?

The same laws of nature therefore should apply to heaven and earth alike, as they would to Europe and America alike.⁶

This new recognition of the physical homogeneity of the earth against the long-held belief in its nonhomogeneity⁷ began to emerge with the success of the Portuguese voyages along the West African coast. In 1434 the Portuguese rounded Cape Bojador on the bulge of West Africa, hitherto considered impassable and serving as the *nec plus ultra* boundary marker between the "habitable temperate zone" and the Torrid Zone, whose excessive heat was supposed to have made it uninhabitable. A decade later another voyage led the Portuguese to land on the shores of today's Senegal. There they discovered that the Torrid Zone was "populatissima" [thickly populated], as Columbus was to observe later during his own 1482 voyage to the Portuguese trading post/fort at Elmina on the West African coast.⁸

In the wake of Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic some half a century after the Portuguese rounded the Cape, it was the same recog-

nition of the earth's homogeneity that was to strike his contemporaries most vividly, as the humanist Peter Martyr, for example, attests in his *De Orbe Novo* (1530).⁹ For them, Columbus' successful voyage across the Ocean Sea (the Atlantic Ocean), hitherto held to be non-navigable, also verified the earth's homogeneity against the grain of the orthodox Christian-Aristotelian physics of the time. According to this earlier physics/geography, the land of the Western hemisphere should not have been there but should rather have been in its natural place, submerged under the lighter element of water, nonhomogeneous with the tripartite area of the earth above the water, centered on Jerusalem. The earth of Latin-Christian Europe had been popularly believed, within the terms of this overall notion of order,¹⁰ to have been held above the water, out of its natural place, only by the intervention of Divine Providence.¹¹

Like the earlier recognition of the equal habitability of the Torrid Zone, this parallel discovery that the natural relation between the elements of water and earth turned out to be the same in the regions of the Western hemisphere as in the hemisphere of Christian Europe was fundamental to the rise of the physical sciences. It was therefore fundamental to the rise of a new self-correcting order of knowledge based on the gradual acceptance of the fact that the "same kind of matter" did build "all parts of the universe" as it "built all parts of the earth." In both cases this matter was said to be governed by the "same causes or forces." Therefore, Newton's analogy of Nature could permit extrapolation from constant properties that are "found to be in all bodies within the reach of our experiments" to all bodies whatsoever, seeing that the "analogy of Nature is always consonant to itself."

Five hundred years after the 1492 voyage, can an analogous premise be put forward that there are laws of culture that should hold in the same way for the now hegemonic and globalized culture of the techno-industrial West as they have served for all human cultures hitherto? If, as Clifford Geertz pointed out, our contemporary culture should be recognized as being but one local example "of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds," can such laws now be seen as being as applicable to this "local culture" (however now globalized) as to all others?¹² Are there laws that function for our contemporary world-systemic order in as prescriptive a manner as they do for all the traditional cultures that Western anthropology, through its critical sifting of the data provided by multiple

“native informants,” has so lucidly charted, dissected, deciphered, and analyzed and so eloquently led us to comprehend?

More to the point, would we also be permitted to reason, infer, and predict from a parallel analogy of culture that is always consonant with itself in the same way as Newton’s analogy of Nature? By applying the mountains of data gathered from the study of the cultural bodies of non-Western cultures to our own Westernized cultural body (whose processes of textualization still remain opaque to us, as the severity of our global crises reveal), could we decipher the laws governing its institution and stable replication as a self-organizing and “linguaging living system,” to use the term of Maturana and Varela, or, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase, a “form of life” whose ensemble of representations must necessarily be “impervious to philosophical attack”?¹³

Let us pursue the analogy between the two analogies further. Contemporary physicists have enabled us to imagine a singularity/Event by which the universe and time came into existence together (making it meaningless to ask what came before the universe).¹⁴ Can we imagine a parallel Event/singularity by which, as both the Cameroonian scholar Théophile Obenga and the Italian scholar Ernesto Grassi propose, the human species first emerged in the animal kingdom? Can we imagine this event as effecting a rupture with the “functional biological circle of life,” and therefore with the primacy of the genetic constraints on its behaviors, by substituting in the place of the gene the “sacred signs” or governing code of the Logos, the Word?¹⁵

In the place of time, can we speak of the emergence of value, culture, and mind? By mind, I mean a correlated phenomenon (or emergent property) that could have come into existence only consequent to the evolution of the capacity for language, which had empowered the branch of the primate family who were its bearers to move outside the genetically regulated order of nature (*ordo naturae*) and to put in its place the culturally instituted order of words (*ordo verborum*).¹⁶ By means of this new order, therefore, the behaviors of this species as a hybrid form of life, both *bios* and *logos*, would be motivated according to the laws of a new level of existence, one that was both continuous (the brain) and discontinuous (the mind) with Newton’s analogy of Nature.¹⁷

B. F. Skinner pointed out that the regulation of human behaviors and how they are ordered is still the most urgent question facing us as

a species. If twenty-five hundred years ago “it may have been said that man understood himself as well as any other part of his world,” today “he is the thing he understands the least.” Although disciplines such as “physics and biology have come a long way, there has been no comparable development of anything like a science of human behavior.” Consequently, although Greek physics and biology are only of historical interest, university students are still assigned the dialogues of Plato as if they could throw any “light on human behavior.” Yet unlike Greek physics and biology, which “no matter how crude” led “eventually to modern science,” the Greek way of thinking about human behavior “led nowhere.” They are still taken seriously and are still “with us today . . . not because they possessed some kind of eternal verity, but because they did not contain the seeds of anything better.” Because of this, confronted as we are now with having to solve “the terrifying problems that face us today,” we have turned not in the direction of a “science of behaviors” but rather to science and technology, where we can play from strength.¹⁸

Yet a Catch-22 emerges here. All the problems that we attempt to solve by means of science and technology—whether “the use of better methods of birth control” (to “contain a population explosion”), antiballistic missile systems (to ward off “the threat of a nuclear holocaust”), new foods and better ways of growing them (to stave off “world famine”), novel ways of reducing or disposing of waste (to stop “the pollution of the environment”), steps to control disease (for “improved sanitation and hygiene”), or housing and transportation (“to solve the problems of the ghettos”)—return to haunt us. “Sanitation and medicine” have made “the problems of population more acute,” war has acquired “a new horror with the invention of nuclear weapons,” and “the affluent pursuit of happiness is largely responsible for pollution.” Overall, techno-scientific solutions have themselves served to make things worse: “Every new source from which man has increased his power on the earth has been used to diminish the prospects of his successors. All his progress has been made at the expense of damage to his environment which he cannot repair and could not foresee.”¹⁹

Paradoxically, Skinner’s own proposed solution was itself techno-scientific. He called for the invention of a “technology of behavior” based on social-environmental engineering, which he hoped would rid us of our present deep-seated (essentially liberal) belief in an “au-

onomous inner man/woman" as *the* causal source whose internal feelings and states drive our behaviors. He therefore proposed that we should lay to one side the "explanatory fiction that is the mind" and seek instead to rearrange the events and processes in the real world that motivate or discourage specific behaviors by reward or punishment. Yet as Skinner himself asked, if we are to go from a one-sided inner-manism to an equally one-sided social-environmental engineering, who or what will engineer the engineer?²⁰

Can we therefore get beyond both our present conception of the "autonomous inner man" as causal source and Skinner's own reductionist "technology of behaviors" by reinventing the study of letters as the study not merely of literature but more comprehensively of the *ordo verborum* as *the* projected causal and lawlike source of our behaviors? By comparing the *ordo* of our contemporary culture, and the behavioral effects to which it leads, with other parallel "local culture" orders of discourse and their behavioral effects (as in the case of the Aztec Empire's religiously prescribed goal of "maintaining the flow of life," which led to the ritual sacrifice of human victims, perceived by its practitioners as a pious and virtuous act),²¹ could we now be empowered to postulate laws of culture and therefore of the regulation of behaviors that should hold in all human orders, "*in Europa et in America*"?

My central hypothesis is that we can. The Quincentenary of Columbus' 1492 voyage impels us toward nothing less, pointing up as it has done the necessity of finding an interpretation beyond the conflictual either/or of Euro-American celebrants and American Indian dissidents together with their Marxist and environmentalist allies. Only with such a new interpretation can we come to intellectual terms with the Janus-faced reality of an occurrence that was both a "glorious achievement," with respect to the gradual expansion of areas of human freedom, and the first act in a process of undoubted genocide/ethnocide—not to say ecocide, as Kirkpatrick Sale argues, as well as of an unrivaled degree of human subjugation.²²

Such a conceptual breakthrough would move us to complete the only partial autonomy of our cognition as a species by enabling the barrier between C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the culture of the natural sciences and the culture of the disciplines dealing with our individual and social behaviors—to be erased. It would move beyond the limits of the reductionist approach of sociobiology and its recent clones.²³ From an ecumenically human perspective, it would be the

only possible commemoration of the Event of 1492, spelling triumph and dazzling self-realization for one population group and the global expansion of its "form of life" or culture—the Western European—while spelling expropriation, inferiorization, and exploitation for so many others. In an ironic twist, the maintenance of this dichotomy, according to Joan Marble Cook, has also led to an ongoing devaluation of the human species as a whole, insofar as it came to describe the human on the model of a natural organism in place of the Judeo-Christian description of humankind as created in the image of God.²⁴ This devaluation has turned back on Europe itself in Auschwitz, the Gulag, and the killing fields of today's Bosnia, like those of Cambodia earlier and the ongoing ones of Rwanda and Burundi.²⁵ This process of human devaluation and expendability has now peaked in the automatic discarding, as so much "industrial waste," of the Black and Latino lives of the United States' inner cities, as well as of American Indian lives on the reservation (where teenage suicide rates are among the highest in the world) and their global counterparts, the jobless/welfareless denizens of the shantytown/*favela* archipelagoes of the Third and Fourth Worlds.²⁶

These archipelagoes of joblessness and poverty function at a world-systemic level as the chaos to our First World "developed" societies, in as lawlike a manner as the inner cities' dystopia negates the behavior-orienting goal of the "affluent pursuit of happiness" of those who live in the utopia of the suburbs.²⁷ Yet it is this same goal, culturally defined as the mastery of nature and the conquest of natural scarcity,²⁸ which has also given rise to the technological miracles of our First World everyday lives, to the triumph of Sputnik moving outside "the shadow of the earth," of Westernized man's first footfall on the moon, of Pioneer 2's moving outside and beyond the hitherto *nec plus ultra* of the pull of the solar system. At the same time, the ensemble of behaviors motivated by this goal also threatens the oasis of life that is our planetary habitat in an otherwise (so far as we yet know) lifeless universe. What if it does so in as lawlike a manner as the Aztec Empire's goal of "maintaining the flow of life" led to the paradox of both the dazzling beauty of its local culture and the religious sacrifice of innumerable human victims?²⁹

On the basis of the proposed "analogy of culture consonant with itself," and against the either/or of triumphalist celebrants and demonologizing dissidents, I want to put forward here an alternative interpretation of the Event of 1492. Along with the earlier voyages of

the Portuguese, whose long-term objective was to arrive at the spice trade of the East Indies, this Event now needs to be seen as made possible only in the wider context of the rise and expansion of the modern European state. The context would have to include also the epistemological mutation of Renaissance humanism, on whose cognitive basis the new form of the state instituted itself.³⁰

I shall put forward this interpretation, however, from the specific reference frame of Black studies, as defined in its initial eruption as a liminal perspectival standpoint³¹ which fought its way into mainstream academia in the late sixties and seventies in the wake of the social upheaval of the civil rights movement and of the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The cognitive advantage of such a perspective is that in order to articulate itself as such a standpoint, Black studies was and is compelled to challenge what Michel Foucault calls the "ground" of our present epistemological order. This means that it must also challenge, in Ernesto Grassi's term, the "rhetorical a priori" of the purely biological description of the human.³² Within the logic of this "ground," the articulation of such a standpoint would normally appear as conceptually contradictory to the order of knowledge to which it gives rise. In just such a way the call for the "lay" studies of the Renaissance humanists, which instituted the *studia humanitatis* and its secular conception of the human, must have seemed contradictory within the still medieval context of the clergy-controlled Scholastic order of knowledge.³³

The present phase of Black studies has co-opted the mainstream and redefined it as a "multicultural" or ethnicity-based "African American studies."³⁴ In its initial phase, however, the call for Black studies joined with the calls for a series of other non-White studies—American Indian (the Red), Chicanos, Asian—as well as for feminist studies to constitute a systemic challenge to the truth of our present order of knowledge, by revealing this truth to be true only from a normative perspectival standpoint, defined by specific characteristics. At the level of population groups the characteristic was being non-Black, non-Native American, non-Chicano, non-Asian; at the level of *class*, being generically middle class³⁵ or, if working class, a jobholder;³⁶ and at the level of gender and sexuality, being generically male and heterosexual. The mode of "objective truth" to which our present order of knowledge gives rise was revealed to depend for its objectivity and truth on the systemic repression of a correlated series of perspectival standpoints, including those of all non-White population groups, the

non-middle class, the jobless, and the non-heterosexual population. One would have to include among those groups Euro-American middle-class women. While sharing in all other respects in the benefits of culture, race, and class, the triple hegemony of their middle-class male peers, they nevertheless have experienced the anomaly of their nongeneric gender role as contrasted with the generic role of their male peers.

My proposal here is that the repression of these systemic standpoints as the condition of securing our order's "regime of truth" is analogous to the way in which the pre-fifteenth-century geography of the earth and its Christian Ptolemaic astronomy also depended, for the absolutization of their *divinely* guaranteed "truth," on the repression of any recognition of the culture specificity of the standpoint from which the mainstream geographers and astronomers of medieval Europe viewed the earth and the universe. Neither the earth, viewed from a projected Jerusalem-centered perspective, nor the universe, viewed from a moving earth represented as fixed and unmoving, was visible as a perspective at all from within the Scholastic order of knowledge.³⁷

I shall therefore attempt to put forward an interpretation of 1492 from the liminal or Conceptual Other standpoint of Black studies,³⁸ based on the hypothesis that there are laws that hold for all human cultures, including our contemporary "local culture" of the West, and that the functioning of these laws, when elucidated, can alone explain (rather than explain away by either canonizing or demonologizing Columbus-as-autonomous-Man) the Janus-faced effects of 1492. It is the quest for these laws, and therefore for a new conception of causality as culture-systemic rather than as either supernatural or bioevolutionary/supracultural (*i.e.*, autonomously inner-man determined), that alone can lead us to the frontier of a new science of the *ordo verborum*, of a science, therefore, rather than merely a technology of human behaviors, as the only possible commemoration of 1492 from an ecumenically human perspective.



In fourteen hundred and ninety-two
Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue.

—Winifred Sackville Stoner, Jr.

Did the grim reaper ever take in a harvest larger than that caused by the Spanish conquest of the New World? And then the enormity of death of African slaves during the middle passage and on the plantations. . . . Yet to offer the standardized rational explanation . . . is equally pointless. For behind the conscious self-interest lie intricately construed, long-standing, unconscious cultural formations of meaning—modes of feeling—whose social network of tacit conventions and imagery lies in a symbolic world and not in that feeble “pre-Kantian” fiction of the world represented by rationalism or utilitarian rationalism.

—Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*

I still continued, however, to hold in esteem the studies of the schools. I was aware that the languages taught in them are necessary to the understanding of the writings of the ancients; that the grace of fable stirs the mind . . . and, in fine, that it is useful to bestow some attention upon all, even upon those abounding the most in superstition and error, that we may be in a position to determine their real value, and guard against being deceived.

—René Descartes

In February, 1493, as he returned from a “fourth part of the earth” which according to the geography of his time should not have been there, Columbus wrote a letter exulting in the fact that he had been proved right. The success of his voyage now flew in the face of all the learned authorities and mainstream geographers who had insisted on the impossibility of his project, calling it a *burla* [joke], a charlatan’s project, or a fable. Toward the end of the letter he wrote:

And the eternal God, our Lord, gives to all those who walk in His way victory over things which appear impossible, and this was notably one. For although men have talked or have written of these lands, all was conjecture, without getting a look at it, but amounted only to this, that those who for the most part listened, judged it more a fable than that there was anything in it, however small.³⁹

For Columbus himself, as well as for his contemporaries such as Peter Martyr and López de Gómara, it is clear that the epistemological

interpretation of his landfall was foremost.⁴⁰ Only by contradicting the orthodox premises of the Scholastic order of knowledge could Columbus have found financial backers and undertaken the voyage as a nautical feat. To do this he had to reconceive the earth in apocalyptic millenarian terms: given the imminent Second Coming of Christ, the urgent need for all “idolators” to be converted, and the divine purpose of creating the earth for the salvation of souls, it followed not only that all seas had to be navigable but that all areas had to be homogeneously habitable. As he wrote in a letter after his voyage, against the mainstream scholarship, “God *could* have put land over there”⁴¹—that is, in the Western hemisphere, which was supposed to be outside the Christian God’s providential grace, submerged in its natural place under the lighter element of water.⁴²

Nonetheless, it is the technological interpretation of 1492, as vulgarized in the patriotic doggerel of Winifred Sackville Stoner, that remains until now hegemonic. This interpretation, that the true feat and glorious achievement of Columbus was “sailing the Ocean Blue” and thereby “discovering” America, has proved up until now to be “impervious to philosophical attack” only because it forms part of the Lyotardian Grand Narrative of Progress and of European and Euro-American Manifest Destiny that impelled both the rise of the Western industrial civilization and the dynamic colonizing expansion of its “way of life” into every part of the globe.⁴³ Such a narrative, as Richard Waswo points out, should be seen as belonging in a generic sense to the corpus of “fictional imaginings,” which in all cultures function to shape perceptions, structure consciousness, and thereby orient behaviors. Waswo gives as an example of such narratives the “founding legend of Western civilization,” the legend of the descent from Troy. In its literary retellings from Virgil to the sixteenth century, this narrative served to shape “the actual behaviors of Europeans in their subsequent contact with other newly discovered cultures.”⁴⁴ In the same way, the fictional imaginings of what I shall call the contemporary European and Euro-American legend of descent from a Columbus who has been defined since the nineteenth century as the technologically triumphant discoverer of America has come to shape our own behaviors. Where the earlier legend of descent was oriented about the political stability and expansion of the state, the later legend has oriented itself about the new subgoals of techno-industrial Progress and national-racial Manifest Destiny generated from the supraordinate goal of the affluent pursuit of happiness.

Furthermore, both the legend of descent from Troy and the narrative of Christian Providential destiny central to Columbus' reconception of the earth were the matrix forms of which the legend of descent from Columbus was a transumed form. I use the word *transume* here in a special sense. In drawing attention to the processes of diachronic intertextuality at work in discourse, Harold Bloom lays emphasis on the rhetorical figure of transumption. He notes that "transumption of metalepsis" is the traditional name in rhetoric for what John Hollander calls the "figure of interpretive allusion." "Transumptive chains," Bloom continues, function to retain "central linkages . . . vital to tradition," with the continuity kept going "by means of its retroping (*i.e.*, transuming) of earlier tropes."⁴⁵ This concept of transumptive chains enables us to see the way in which the nineteenth-century Western bourgeoisie carried over both feudalism's other-worldly goal of *spiritual redemption*, in the Judeo-Christian matrix narrative, and the state's this-worldly goal of *rational redemption*,⁴⁶ into the new goal of economic growth or *material redemption*, which it needed to secure the conditions of its own social hegemony.⁴⁷

As a variant narrative of Emancipation, the new legend of descent from Columbus also helped to shape the perceptions, and therefore the behaviors, that led to the West's technological mastery over nature, as well as correlatively to its economic domination over the still largely agrarian "native peoples" of the planet, whose mode of reflexive thought and founding narratives had prescribed quite a different relation to "nature."⁴⁸ Within the dynamic of the new telos of a rapidly industrializing bourgeoisie, all nonindustrial peoples were now classified as *natives* and conceptually assimilated to the category of "nature" to be mastered.⁴⁹ This was so whether "the natives" were external to the nation-states of Europe and North America or internal to them as Liminal Others, *i.e.*, Indians and Negroes.⁵⁰

This "legend of descent" was first given popular expression on the occasion of the Fourth Centenary of Columbus' voyage at the Chicago World's Fair Exposition. In its physical layout and architecture, as well as in its organizing principles, roster of speakers, invited guests, and personnel, the World's Fair enacted this legend in the overall structure of what one scholar has called "its pedagogy."⁵¹ The fair was named "White City," and considering its implicit pedagogy it was named appropriately. The indigenous people of North America were included only as an "ethnic" (that treacherous term!) anthropo-

logical exhibit whose "native" way of life, put on display, served to attest to the manifestly destined dominant role of the Euro-American descendants of Columbus.⁵² Furthermore, the peoples of African descent in their transhipped cultures of African origin—who together with the Europeans and the indigenous peoples formed the new triadic existential matrix of the post-1492 Americas—were, in spite of their protests, totally excluded from any participation in the fair.⁵³

There was one partial exception—yet this too proved the rule. In the pedagogy of the fair, no "social image served more significantly . . . than that of women." Not only did a board of lady managers serve, "by an initiating act of Congress . . . along side the World's Columbian Commission, but as a 'separate department' the world of women . . . possessed a building of its own . . . designed by a female architect" and "decorated, arranged and furnished entirely by women."⁵⁴ These women, however, were as exclusively White as they were middle class. Originally excluded from participation, a handful of Black middle-class women activists, after a bitter struggle and sustained protest, were finally accorded a limited participation.⁵⁵ Gender and class similarities had not easily overridden one of the central organizing principles of the fair: the psychosocial phenomenon that W.E.B. Du Bois, writing a decade or so later, would define as the "color line."⁵⁶ Equally metaphorical as the habitable/uninhabitable line of geography before Columbus and the celestial/terrestrial (and Redeemed Spirit/degraded flesh) line of astronomy before Copernicus, the color line was not to be easily breached.

Non-White groups found themselves included *only* on the other side of the color line. Like the American Indians, the indigenous peoples of Dahomey in West Africa were allowed to participate only as anthropological "exhibits" displaying their "native" ways of life in their "native" villages and therefore as "native Others" to the technological master of nature and ostensibly supracultural, autonomous "Man" of the Western bourgeoisie. The ultimate Conceptual Other to this "Man," however, was the ostensibly inert and totally nonautonomous Black American "nigger," whose population group of African and Afro-mixed descent was now prescriptively defined in the new Origin Narrative of Evolution as the ambiguous link between the nonevolved ape and the highly evolved human embodied in the peoples of European descent.⁵⁷ Their exclusion was as conceptually logical within the terms of our contemporary order as the unbreach-

ability of the habitable/uninhabitable and celestial/terrestrial lines within the medieval order's matrix Judeo-Christian Origin Narrative of Genesis, the Fall, and mankind's expulsion from Eden.⁵⁸

The conceptual logic expressed by the techno-triumphalist interpretation of 1492 was the same logic to which the layout of the fair gave precise expression. It was based on a bio-evolutionary notion of order mapped onto the range of human hereditary variations, or races, and dictating "relative positions of value . . . of inclusion and exclusion" of the new post-Reconstruction ensemble of role allocations.⁵⁹ The resulting mappings at the domestic level were the gender definitions of male-as-Breadwinner and female-as-Homemaker; at the level of the world-systemic order as a whole were the normative mode of the subject ("Man") and its Liminal or internal Conceptual Human Other category (the "nigger" and by extrapolation the "native").⁶⁰ My counterinterpretation will therefore be elaborated from the reference frame of this internal and excluded Other, that is, from the Liminal observer standpoint of the population group (or human hereditary variation) that was and continues to be the most excluded ontologically by the new "legend of descent" and "fictional imaginings" generated from this techno-triumphalist interpretation, just as it was excluded physically from any participation in the Chicago World's Fair. This exclusion served to embody the new founding representation of the ostensible *genetic nonhomogeneity* of the species (divided between the bio-evolutionarily selected and the bio-evolutionarily dysselected), which had now come to serve as the transumed form of the represented nonhomogeneity of the earth.⁶¹

Each "general notion of the world" contains within it, David Bohm points out, a "specific idea of order." The ancient Greeks had mapped (and thereby absolutized) their idea of order onto the physical universe as that of an "increasing perfection from the earth to the heavens."⁶² This order of physico-metaphysical perfection was then reclassified in new Spirit/Flesh terms by Judeo-Christianity and remapped onto the geography of the earth as well as onto the physical universe.⁶³ In addition, as Wlad Godzich points out, each absolutized "notion of order" then functions as the "space of otherness" anchoring the "foundational principles" of each society in a realm "beyond the reach of human desire and temptation" as the condition of its stability across time. Each such society carries a "heavy burden of debt to this space of otherness," owing "its meaning, its organization, its capacity

to act upon itself, and thus its ability to manage order and change" to this space of Otherness and its idea of order.⁶⁴ This debt of meaning is also foundational to the way in which the society knows itself, to its orthodox system of knowledge and system-maintaining mode of conventional reason. Order and knowledge, Francisco Varela notes, are thereby "inextricably entangled."⁶⁵

In the brief hiatus of intellectual inquiry opened by and during the eruptive interregnum of the sixties, the North American novelist Robert Pirsig argued in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that Columbus needs to be seen "beyond his schoolbook stereotype" if his voyage is to be reinterpreted in the light of the "root expansion of thought" that it entailed and that enabled him to move beyond the conventional reason of his time into a "realm beyond reason."⁶⁶ Recently, the Cameroonian scholar Théophile Obenga has placed Columbus and other "men of the sea" such as Vasco da Gama and Magellan among the group of lay humanist intellectuals, the synergistic interactions of whose new modes of thinking were not only to remake Europe but also to make possible "a new image of the earth and conception of the cosmos."⁶⁷

My own proposed interpretation uses both Pirsig's and Obenga's epistemological explanatory models to propose that the significance of Columbus' 1492 voyage lies in this: that Columbus managed to break out of the limits of the "notion of order" or adaptive mode of truth of the mainstream order of knowledge and therefore out of the limits of the cognitive closure of its "regime of truth" as it functioned with respect to the geography of the earth. He did so on the basis of counterpremises with which (from his liminal perspective as layman and autodidact and mapmaker-cum-merchant) he had argued for the viability of his projected voyage across a supposedly necessarily nonnavigable Ocean Sea. He had argued some seven years, as his later letters to the sovereigns of Spain reveal, against the learned authorities of Portugal and Spain and in the teeth of their mockery and derision.⁶⁸ In spite of his own gross factual errors and residual medieval beliefs, his religiously inspired counterchain of reasoning led him to make a voyage that, together with the earlier voyages of the Portuguese, made possible a veridical image of the earth as the necessary basis of a science of physical geography.⁶⁹ Half a century later Copernicus, aided by the conceptual repercussions of these empirical voyages, was to do the same with respect to the equally adaptive (because derived from a space of Otherness

and the ensuing notion of order) truth of Christian-Ptolemaic astronomy, and he thereby opened the way to the development of an increasingly veridical conception of the cosmos.

I adopt here Gerald Edelman's central distinction between adaptive and veridical truth. In *Neural Darwinism*, Edelman points out that all forms of perception involve categorization of the world by the perceiving animal. Given that there is no "prior immutable order of things," when a human subject or the member of an animal species perceives the world, he/she does not confront a "given semantic order." Rather, he/she must "not only identify and classify things, but also decide what to do in the absence of prior detailed descriptive programs, with the exception, of course, of certain fixed programs handed down by evolution."⁷⁰ The problem of all perception, therefore, is initially a problem of taxonomy in which the individual subject must "classify" the things of its world with reference to its well-being. Furthermore, all such classifications are, necessarily in the case of animals, species-specific—as must be the "truths" that these classification systems embody.

The concept of adaptive truth therefore refers to this consideration: that in all forms of animal life, as with all culture-specific modes of being, whatever "solutions to [a] problem are adopted by an individual organism . . . must be framed within that organism's ecological niche and for its own adaptive advantage." In both cases, Edelman writes, "the internal taxonomy of perception is adaptive, but is not necessarily veridical in the sense that it is concordant with the descriptions of physics."⁷¹ This is because, from the standpoint of the adapting organism (or, in the case of human life, of the culture-specific mode of the subject), what is imperative is not categorization of the world as it is (that it should know that the earth has a round shape, rotates on its axis, and revolves about the sun, for example). What it wants to know instead is the kind of knowledge that can enable it to orient its own behaviors to secure the realization and stable replication of its form of life—in the case of animals its species and its genome, and in the case of humans its culturally coded mode of subjectivity (the I) and of symbolic kinship (the We).

On the analogy of Edelman's proposal with respect to the species-specific modes of adaptive truth, let me therefore propose that all human cultures, including our own contemporary and now global-

ized "local culture," must know and normally categorize their socio-environmental reality in the terms of the specific order of adaptive truth whose referent is the mode of the subject and its enacted conception of Being/Lack-of-being. (Examples would be the distinction True/Untrue Self of the feudal religio-cultural order, the Rational/Irrational Self of Renaissance "Man," and the Selected/Dysselected Self of the nineteenth-century purely biologized "Man.")⁷² If this is so, then under normal circumstances all such "truths" must diverge significantly from what would turn out to be the veridical, or supra-cultural because human-species, knowledge of the environmental reality in which each culture finds itself—as a "linguaging living system," in the words of Maturana and Varela.⁷³ Rather than a matter of "false consciousness," therefore, as Marx's parallel concept of ideology would imply,⁷⁴ what is normally imperative to each culture-as-a-living-system is that it know its reality adaptively, *i.e.*, in ways that can best orient the collective behaviors of its subjects and thereby best enable its own replication as such a system, together with its mode of subjectivity (the I) and of conspecificity (the We).

The mainstream geography of the feudal-Christian order of Latin Europe before the voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus can therefore be recognized as a specific instance of the mode of adaptive truth: of what has been defined in other terms as "knowledge of categories" rather than "knowledge of the world as it is."⁷⁵ Its aim, rather than acquiring truth-in-itself, was successfully motivating the behaviors of its feudal-Christian subjects in order to ensure its well-being and replication as an order. Premises such as a nonhomogeneous earth divided between a habitable realm within God's redemptive grace and an uninhabitable realm outside it would therefore have been essential to the mode of adaptive truth. So would the premise of a universe divided between a celestial realm (as the analogy of the redeemed Spirit) moving in perfect circular motion and the nonmoving, degraded, and "fallen" realm of the terrestrial (as the analogy of the fallen flesh).

The feudal mode of the subject of Latin-Christian Europe would have normally known and classified its physical environment in this way. Such knowledge provided an analogical system onto which the status-organizing principle of feudal caste had been mapped (based on the premise of an ontological difference of substance between noble/nonnoble hereditary lines of descent, as well as between the "spiritual"

line of descent of the Clergy and the fleshly line of the Laity). The social order was thereby absolutized by being represented as divinely preordained as the order of the physical universe itself.

This is why, as Kurt Hubner points out, the conceptual breakthrough of Copernicus in astronomy cannot be understood outside the “general upheaval” of Renaissance humanism and the rise of the new historico-system-ensemble of the modern state, which displaced the earlier feudal order.⁷⁶ Nor can the voyages of Columbus, because it was only in the context of the modern state’s rise and its new goals of territorial conquest, trade, and colonization that Columbus would be enabled to realize his ambitions to acquire wealth and social status.⁷⁷ Indeed, as Daniel Boorstin has emphasized, the voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus were dispatched and partly financed by the emergent monarchies of Portugal and Spain within the dynamics of their newly postfeudal worldview and global expansionary thrust.

What Pirsig defined as Columbus’ “root expansion of thought”—based on the counterpremise that God could indeed have placed lands in the Western hemisphere and that therefore “all seas are navigable”—was therefore, like Copernicus’ hypothesis of an earth that moved, part of the sequence of counterthinking by which the intelligentsia of Western Europe would deconstruct the earlier feudal order’s adaptive knowledge of its physical environment (of the *ordo naturae*) as the regime of truth that had legitimated its structuring hierarchies, and replace it with the gradually more veridical, because self-correcting, findings of the physical sciences.

From the end of the eighteenth century onward, a parallel social and intellectual upheaval took place in which a new intelligentsia displaced the classical episteme or “regime of truth” sustaining the hegemony of the landed gentry and put in place the new epistemological order that we have inherited. In a continuation of this transformation, Darwin effected a profound rupture from the adaptive truth of the earlier episteme’s discipline of natural history by his challenge to the hegemonic premise of the divinely designed “origin of the species.”⁷⁸ His counterpremise of the origin of species in the process of bio-evolutionary Natural Selection opened the frontier of the biological sciences and made possible our now increasingly veridical rather than adaptive knowledge of the bio-organic level of reality.

The paradox here, however, was that the intellectual revolution of the Renaissance opened the route to the physical sciences at the same

time that the adaptive truth generated from its newly reinvented conception of the human had inscribed two categories—those of the *indios* and *negros* as religio-cultural groups—as its Human Others (in the reoccupied place of the Untrue Idolator Other to the True Christian Self) and subjugated their population groups to their liminal roles. The Darwinian revolution operated in the same way. On the one hand, it opened the route to the biological sciences; on the other, by reenacting the Cartesian fallacy of the “definitive morality” (that is, the premise that scientific knowledge of physical or biological reality could be taken as a guide to what human behaviors should be), it made possible the new mode of adaptive truth that should more properly be defined as metaphysical (rather than social) Darwinism.⁷⁹

In the logic of this mode of adaptive truth, the reductionist conception of the human on the model of a natural organism (and thereby, in Frantz Fanon’s terms, on the model of the purely ontogenetic rather than the ontogenetic and sociogenetic human being), now called for the reinscription of *Man* and its Human Others in new terms.⁸⁰ The physical referent of the idea of Otherness to Man would come to be the ostensibly bio-evolutionarily dysselected peoples of African and Afro-mixed descent⁸¹ and the human hereditary variation that they embodied, with all other non-White categories being ontologically evaluated according to their degrees of nearness to or distance from its signifier status as the ultimate marker of genetic non-being. From that point the color line became a new notion of order replacing the habitable/uninhabitable and celestial/terrestrial lines and based on the idea of degrees of genetic perfection from the peoples of African hereditary descent to those of European descent, with all “non-White” or native groups in between. Its logic was meticulously enacted in the layout of the White City of the World’s Fair, in the interpretation of 1492, and in the overall mode of adaptive truth or order of consciousness to which the color line’s “space of otherness” and foundational debt of meaning gave and still give rise.

As the biologists Riedl and Kaspar point out in their book *Biology of Knowledge*, the human conscious cognitive powers (to which we give the name “mind”) are only the most recent superstructures in a continuum of cognitive processes contemporaneous with the emergence of life itself. In consequence, “as the least refined and tested against the real world” and the most at risk for error, these cognitive powers have won their “true victory” only by instituting the natural

sciences.⁸² This ongoing and gradual securing of the autonomy of human knowledge of the physical and, after Darwin, biological or organic levels of reality has not been repeated with respect to our still adaptive knowledge of our culturally instituted social realities, however. At the level of the *ordo verborum*, no such autonomy has as yet been won. It is in the gap or fissure of this cognitive imbalance, I propose here, that the explanatory key to the Janus face of the Event of 1492 is to be found.

The 1492 paradox of glorious achievement and human cognitive emancipation on the one hand and genocidal extinction and human subjugation on the other can be identified therefore as resulting from the partial and incomplete nature of the victory set in motion by the “root expansion of thought” expressed by the voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus. This epistemological interpretation enables us to interpret the Event of 1492 and its aftermath within the vaster history of our ongoing struggle to secure our autonomy of cognition as a species at all three levels of the reality in which we find ourselves—physical, biological, and cultural.⁸³ Such an interpretation also enables us to reinterpret the empirical data put forward, by both celebrants and dissidents, in defense of their respective theses, “glorious achievement” and “genocidal extinction,” as data attesting to the dangers inherent in the cognitive imbalance that has resulted from the incomplete nature of what Riedl and Kaspar call the “victory of the natural sciences.” In our own case, too, it continues to be the incomplete nature of the victory by which we have secured our cognitive autonomy *only* with respect to the first two levels that underlie the contrast between the everyday technological miracles of our contemporary order and the tragic impasse identified by Skinner that we cited earlier.

This cognitive imbalance thus persists between our knowledge of our present global social reality in terms of the *ordo verborum*, expressed in “public language,” and the knowledge of the *ordo naturae*, as elaborated by the “separate language” of the natural sciences. The historian J.G.A. Pocock defines the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences as the “public language” modes of knowledge, in which the scholar “is assumed to be thinking as a member . . . of the political community itself and therefore to be speaking a specialized variation” of the public language by means of whose intercommunicating discursive acts the community institutes and self-organizes itself as a community.⁸⁴

R. S. Crane, in his book *The Idea of the Humanities*, identifies the origins of this imbalance, pointing out that at a crucial moment in the early seventeenth century, Descartes conceptually closed off an opening to knowledge in the humanities that paralleled the opening to the natural sciences, designating a path that was not to be taken. While conceding recognition to the “grace of fables that stir the mind,” Descartes dismissed the “study of letters” as unable to provide any certain reliable knowledge of the type that could be had from the study of “natural philosophy” on the basis of his proposed new method.⁸⁵ Only this latter, he insisted—and not the study of letters, as the original humanists had hoped—held the promise of opening humankind onto a future in which it could become the “lord and possessor” of a nature now represented as the *res extensa* [extended matter] Other to the *res cogitans* [thinking substance] of the human mind.⁸⁶

The proposal here is that we effect a Derridean inversion in order to direct our attention to the “study of letters,” on the basis of the counterhypothesis that only such a study can provide us with any certain and reliable knowledge of the laws that govern our human purposes, goals, and behaviors. The study of letters must therefore be reinvented in new terms that can enable it to take as its object not only literature but, more comprehensively, the *ordo verborum* or orders of discourse, whose processes of intertextualization institute all human forms of life.⁸⁷ In this context, “fables” whose grace “stirs the mind,” and the *ordo verborum* to which they belong, can be seen as inseparable from the functioning of our orders of consciousness, of what Jonathan Miller calls their “vernacular languages of belief and desire.”⁸⁸ The further proposal here is that it is precisely these languages, and the artificial motivation schemas that they enact, that are the causal source of our human behaviors; that they function in a lawlike manner as the analogue of the genetic motivation systems specific to purely organic life, but verbally mediated at the level of human forms of life. It is therefore only by means of a transcultural order of knowledge with respect to the processes of functioning of our “founding fables,” their cosmogonic or Origin Narratives and related “legends of descent,” that we can grasp the nature of the autonomous laws of culture that govern our behaviors.⁸⁹

Skinner dismissed the idea of what he defined as the “explanatory fiction of the mind” having anything to do with our human behaviors. Such behaviors, he argued, were always only the responses to the re-

ward/punishment system of the social environment.⁹⁰ Yet as J. F. Danielli has pointed out, it is only through the ability of our order's discourse and systems of meaning to activate and thereby set the terms of functioning of the internal opiate (endorphin/beta-endorphin) reward and punishment system of the brain that the ensemble of behaviors enacting each human order as a socially cohering "form of life" can be stably induced.⁹¹ If this is so, and if, as David Bohm has further proposed, meaning is being, in that meaning (the *ordo verborum*) directly affects matter (the physiological processes of the body and neurological processes of the brain, *i.e.*, the *ordo naturae*), how does this "affecting" come about in the case of our human behaviors?⁹²

Richard Waswo argues that we "tell ourselves stories" and these stories tell us what to look for and how to act, with their modes of emplotment setting limits on the range of our possible behaviors: "We act as the past—the gods—tell us how to act but the gods are fictions. . . . The stories that we tell ourselves to order the past in turn cause everything."⁹³ How can we make these "fables that stir the mind" subject to a new order of knowledge parallel to the natural sciences as a separate language, yet different from them as well?⁹⁴ Must we not reinvent Descartes' contemptuously dismissed study of letters as the study of the *ordo verborum*, and as such the only royal route to reliable knowledge of our orders of consciousness, their vernacular languages of belief and desire and thereby of our human behaviors? Physicist Heinz Pagels suggests that such a reinvented study of letters would have to be based on the erasing of the barrier between the natural sciences and the humanities, as the condition of making our "narratively constructed worlds and their orders of feeling and belief" subject to "scientific description in a new way."⁹⁵

However, it is the Négritude poet Aimé Césaire, writing in 1946 from the dually liminal position of a Black Martinican and a man of letters, who most precisely coined the term for our rethinking of the study of letters and thereby defined the task that confronts us in the wake of the general, if hitherto aborted, intellectual challenge of the sixties. We need now, Césaire argued, to complete our present "half-starved science" (as the partial "true victory" to which the voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus and the "general upheaval" of the Renaissance had given birth) with a new science of the word, one which, by its very terms, revalorizes the human beyond the biocentric and reductionist conception of our present founding "fable." "More

and more," Césaire wrote, "the word promises to be an algebraic equation that makes the world intelligible. Just as the new Cartesian algebra permitted the construction of theoretical physics, so too an original handling of the word can make possible at any moment a new theoretical and heedless science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of. Then the time will come again when the study of the word will condition the study of nature. But at this juncture we are still in the shadows."⁹⁶

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Race, Founding, and Textuality

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